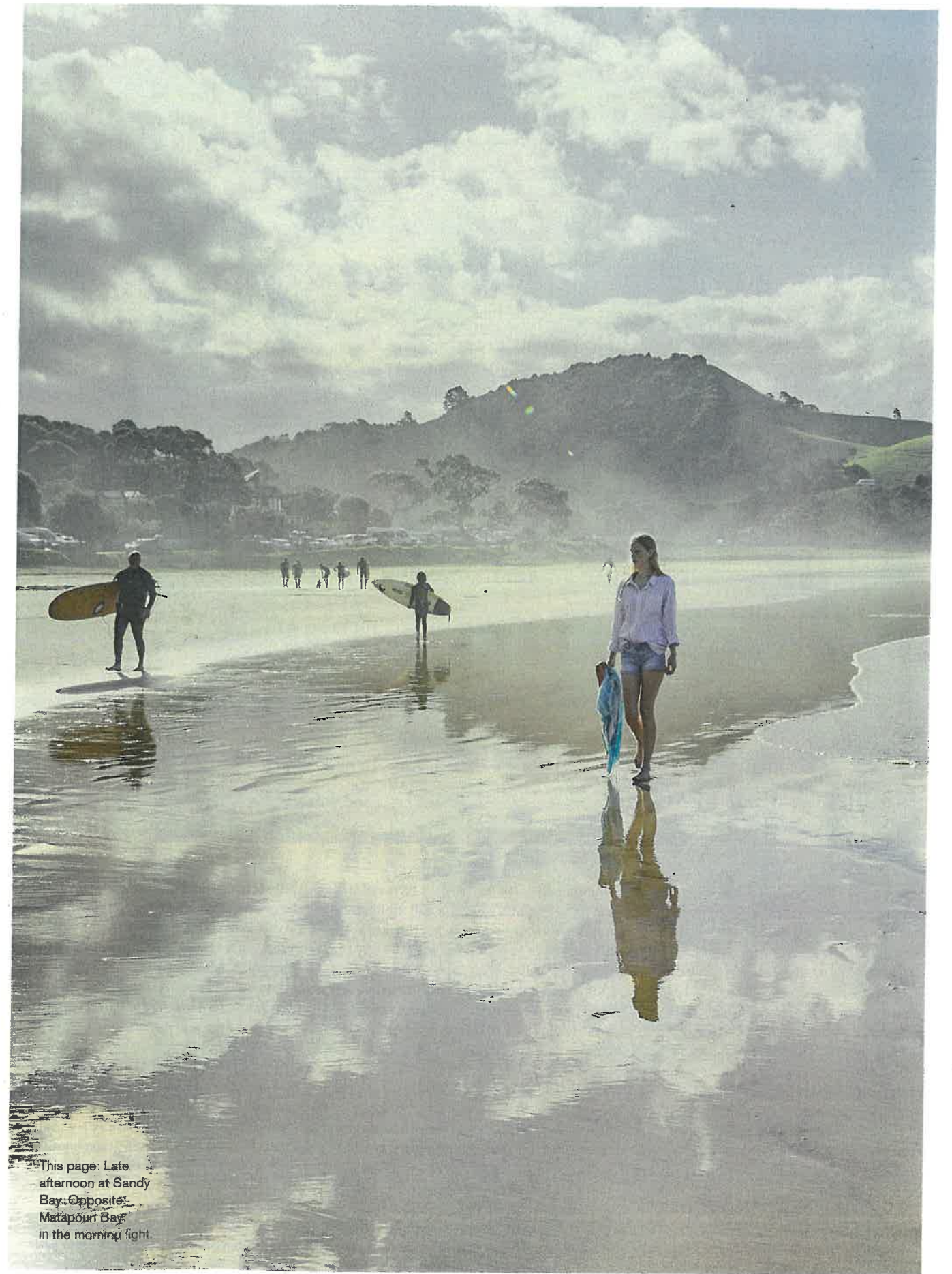


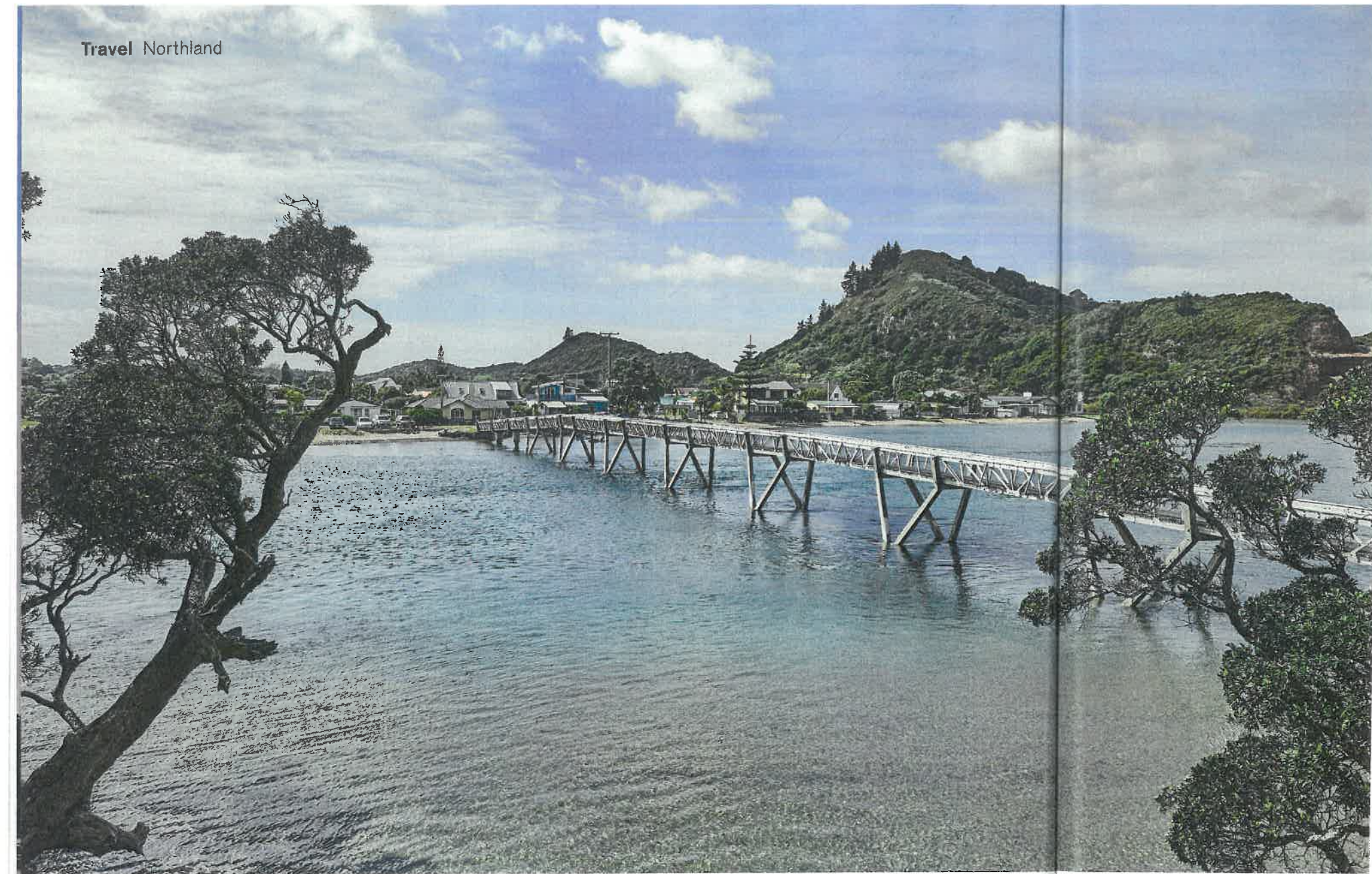
# TRUE NORTH

Pack your togs, towel and sunblock and head to some of the country's most beautiful beaches. We explore 10 of Northland's best.

STORY JO BATES



This page: Late afternoon at Sandy Bay. Opposite: Matapouri Bay in the morning light.



Clockwise from left: The Pātaua footbridge joining the north and south parts of the beach settlement; dolphin-spotting at Whale Bay; Pātaua Beach; Whale Bay.

ASK A NEW ZEALANDER about their favourite beach and their response will inevitably be accompanied by “and it’s virtually deserted”. When it comes to beaches, we don’t do pebbles and we don’t do crowds – we prefer hectares of sand all to ourselves. Just as well there’s no shortage of such places; we are a nation of very spoiled beach-goers.

On a spring trip to research the beaches of Northland and the sub-tropical Far North, the roads are virtually empty. That all changes come high summer, but the crinkly east coast, where pōhutukawa drip into aqua sea, is a stunner year-round – even when it’s not weather for togs.

While the east coast ducks and dives between rocky coves, blue-green bays and long white-sand beaches, the west coast has long, straight stretches of shoreline

standing up to the Tasman. In terms of topography, there’s never a dull moment. And the further north you go, the more likely you are to reconnect with the way that life has been for a very long time – barefoot kids riding horses bareback, dusty metal roads, sunburnt noses and the occasional loss of cellphone coverage. Unspoilt isn’t hard to come by here.

#### GRANDEST ENTRANCE: WHALE BAY

The walk to Whale Bay leads you through native bush brimming with pūriri, kōwhai and ancient pōhutukawa. The well-maintained walkway is a tranquil (until the cicadas start up) meander down to the tree-framed beach where white sand meets turquoise water. It’s a 10-minute walk, but you’ll want to linger at vantage points along

the way to capture shots of the bay through the gnarled branches of pōhutukawa that protrude perilously from the cliff face.

Also on this coastal walkway is very pretty Matapōuri, where the land wraps the bay in an embrace. Just north is Woolleys Bay and then Sandy Bay, where you’ll find surfers making the most of the breaks.

#### SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE: PĀTAUA

Just half an hour from Whangārei is versatile Pātaua. At Pātaua North you can surf and splash in the waves and at Pātaua South there’s family-friendly swimming in the estuary. The two are joined by a footbridge across the Pātaua River.

This is old-school bach-land where families have holidayed for decades, and ownership has passed down through





Clockwise from left: Mimiwhangata Coastal Park; Mimiwhangata sunrise; Matauri Bay.

generations. It's a place where baches are still baches and not palatial holiday homes, and where overnighting visitors still pitch a tent on the lawn. Pātaua is a true slice of old-school New Zealand.

**BACK TO NATURE: MIMIWHANGATA**

Mimiwhangata's raw, untouched beauty is powerful, drawing you in, and the spell is unlikely to be broken by a mobile phone ringing, given the patchy coverage.

The drive to the beach is a stunner – the road is unsealed, narrow and winds down from a ridge with spectacular views over farmland out to Mimiwhangata Coastal Park, a DOC reserve. And thanks to them this place is intact and will remain so.

The area is rich in history: there are 12 recorded pā sites; Ngāti Manaia, Ngāpuhi and

Ngātiwai have all been involved in battles here; and Queen Elizabeth II enjoyed a picnic at Mimiwhangata in 1970 with Prince Philip, Prince Charles and Princess Anne. If you can, stay at Mimiwhangata Lodge ([doc.govt.nz](http://doc.govt.nz)), or camp over the hill at Waikahoa Bay – a fantastic walk from Mimiwhangata.

**It's a place where baches are still baches and not palatial holiday homes, and where visitors still pitch a tent on the front lawn. Pātaua is a true slice of old-school New Zealand.**

**MOST ROMANTIC: OKE BAY**

Surrounded by steep, bush-covered hills, Oke Bay beach is fringed with pōhutukawa and has tropical blue waters. The beach runs in almost a straight line, unlike the undulating curves of the cove, and is the ideal spot for a romantic day out – or a proposal.

Oke Bay can be reached by boat or from the DOC walkway on the Rāwhiti Road, with its carved, tree-flanked entrance that reads Ngā hau e whā (four winds).

Steps take you up the hill and a walkway crosses a ridge, then drops steeply to rocks at the base, before reaching the sand, making it too difficult for anyone who isn't sure-footed. The entrance is located between Te Rāwhiti marae and the small settlement of Rāwhiti, and also marks the entrance to the 16km Cape Brett Track.

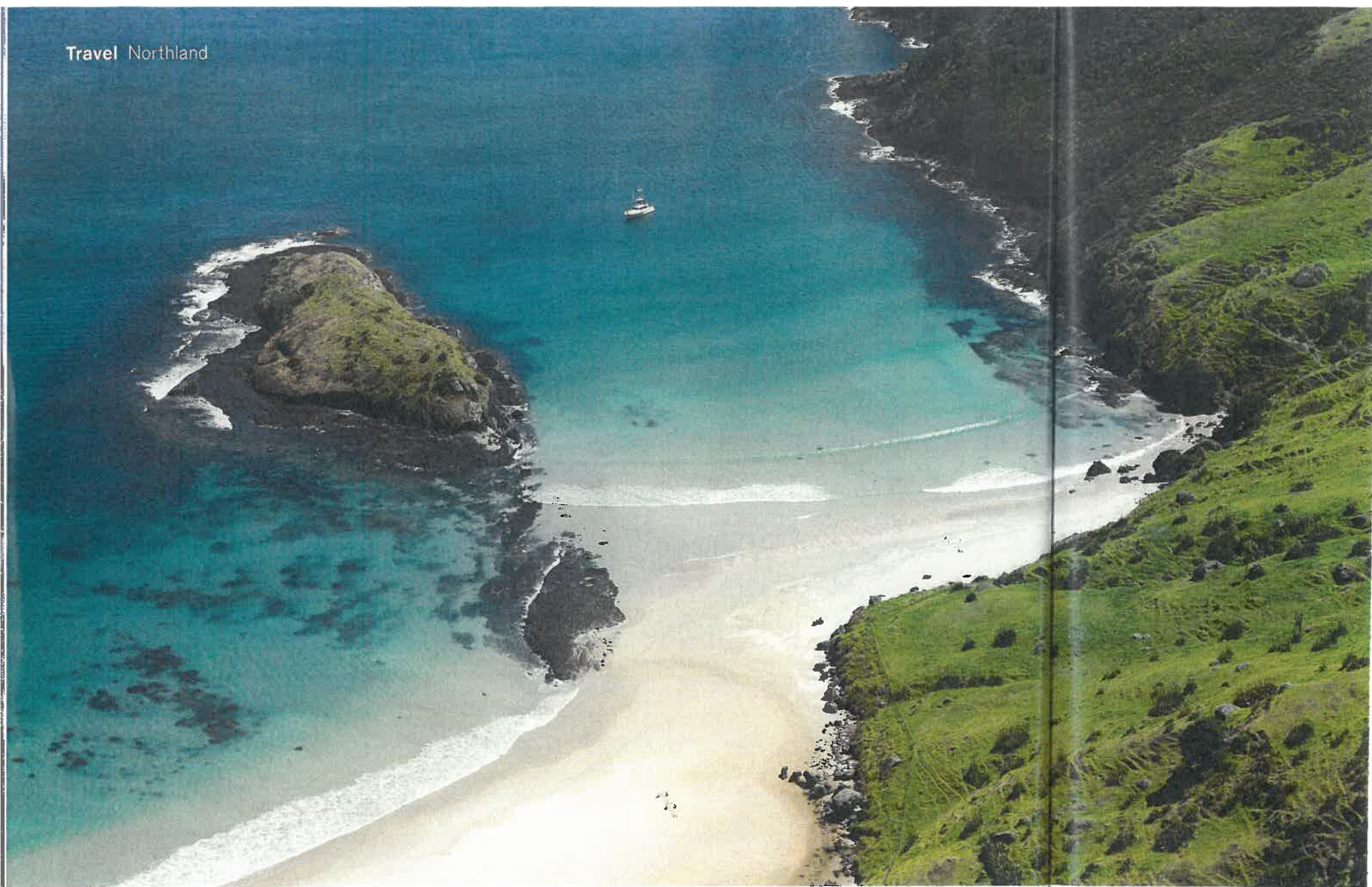
**RICH IN HISTORY: MATAURI BAY**

There's a lot more to this beautiful bay than you can see. This is where the Reverend Samuel Marsden made landfall in 1814 and where he was met by Ngāpuhi leader Hongi Hika, who welcomed the English missionary with a haka and a feast. It was all so good that Marsden spent the night.

There's modern history here, too. Just beyond the campsite is a path leading to a lookout, which rewards with stunning views to the Cavalli Islands and a sculpture by Chris Booth, which honours the *Rainbow Warrior*, the Greenpeace ship bombed in Auckland harbour in 1985. It was later moved and sunk at Matauri Bay and is now a popular dive site.

Unveiled in 1990, Booth's sculpture is more than 10m tall and incorporates a six-tonne central basalt column and the





Clockwise from left:  
Aerial view of  
Kapowairua/Spirits  
Bay; pōhutukawa  
blooms at Matai/Maitai  
Bay; Rarawa Beach;  
the start of the  
walkway to Oke Bay.

*Rainbow Warrior's* bronze propeller. It was commissioned by local hapū Ngāti Kura and New Zealand China Clays, which harvests prized, local halloysite clay destined for export.

**BEST-FRAMED PHOTO OPPORTUNITY: BUTTERFLY BAY**

Pretty in name and magical in setting, Butterfly Bay is reached through an arched rock passage. To its right is another hole in the rock that frames happy summer snaps. Save this one for low tide and wear appropriate footwear so you can cross the rocks from Tauranga Bay.

Laid-back and lovely, both bays are known for their pinkish sand. Tauranga Bay has some of the best beachfront camping in the country, with views out to uninhabited Stephenson Island,

and to the east, Arrow Rocks, the oldest known rocks in the North Island, with fossilised plankton deposits dating back millions of years.

**SQUEAKIEST WHITE SAND: RARAWA BEACH**

At the end of 4km of gravel road, this long, wide and open beach has some of the finest, whitest, squeakiest sand in the north. Pīngao and spinifex plants weave their way across a bank of sand dunes; behind them, native bush without a dwelling in sight.

The sea is changeable, but with a lagoon to play in there's always an option for the kids. The DOC-run Rarawa Beach Campsite, set back from the dunes, has 65 sites occupied on a first-come, first-served basis.

**REGULARLY RATED THE NATION'S BEST: MATAI/MAITAI BAY**

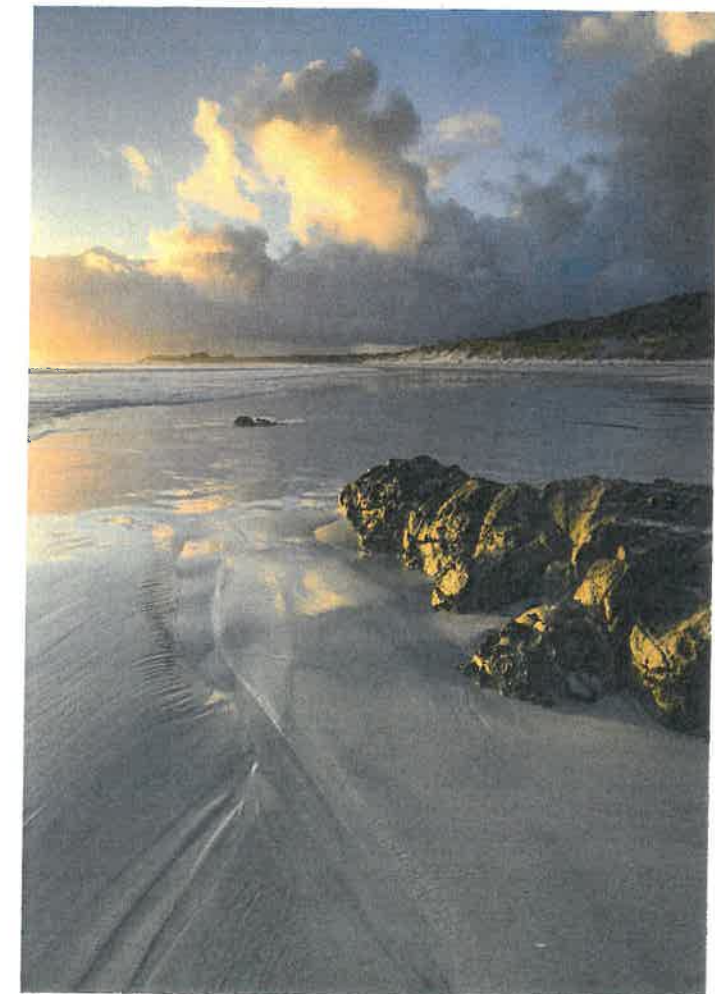
Despite its far-flung location, Matai's natural beauty makes it a hot summer favourite. Matai Bay encompasses two beaches – Matai and Waikato Bay, which are divided by a finger of land near the tip of the Karikari Peninsula.

Choose between tranquil waters, waves, great snorkelling, kayaking and just good old lolling about. The campground has 100 tent sites, but you've got to get in quick – this is a popular spot.

Because of different Māori dialects, the name is variously spelled as Matai and Maitai, which translates as "shining treasure".

**MOST NORTHERN: KAPOWAIKUA/SPIRITS BAY**

With its proximity to Te Rerenga Wairua/ Cape Reinga – New Zealand's most northern



Ngunguru, south of Matapōuni.



tip – and untouched beauty, Spirits Bay is well worth roughing the gravel-road access. From the car park, a path lined with spinifex leads to kilometres of golden sand. Perhaps the remoteness and spiritual significance of the area adds to the wow-factor.

The beach is valued for its surf, wildlife, the 45-site campground and as part of Te Pahi Coastal Track (a three- to four-day walk). While you're in the neighbourhood, take the 45-minute drive to Te Rerenga Wairua, departing place of Māori spirits making their way back to the land of their ancestors, Hawaiki-A-Nui. This is also where the Tasman Sea and Pacific Ocean meet and crash together.

**Mitimiti sits between the mouths of the Whangapē and Hokianga harbours and has the sprawling Warawara Forest in its backyard.**

**WHEN WEST IS BEST: MITIMITI**

Wild horses, rolling golden sandhills and all the elemental beauty the west coast can muster – this is Mitimiti. It's also the birthplace of the late artist and national treasure Ralph Hotere; admirers come here to contemplate how this remote place influenced his sometimes brooding and sparse work.

Unlike many other west-coast beaches, it's a surprise to find this long beach isn't covered in black sand. The tones are every hue of blonde. The beach is technically a public road, and therefore comes with a speed limit of 100km/hr. And in true Far North style, a cow occasionally meanders onto the sand from a nearby paddock.

Mitimiti sits between the mouths of the Whangapē and Hokianga harbours and has the sprawling Warawara Forest in its backyard. It can be reached by roads off State Highway 1 or State Highway 12, the latter of which entails a car-ferry ride from Rāwene to Kohukohu. [northlandnz.com](http://northlandnz.com)

**Northland beaches**



- 1 Pataua
- 2 Whale Bay
- 3 Mimiwhangata
- 4 Oke Bay
- 5 Matauri Bay
- 6 Butterfly Bay
- 7 Matai/Matai Bay
- 8 Rarawa Beach
- 9 Kapowairua/Spirits Bay
- 10 Mitimiti

**Getting there**

Air New Zealand operates daily non-stop flights to Whangārei and Kerikeri from Auckland, with connections across the domestic network.

- Contact Centre 0800 737 000
- Holidays Travel Brokers 0800 737 767
- [airnewzealand.co.nz](http://airnewzealand.co.nz)



PHOTOGRAPHY: TODD EYRE, JO BATES, GETTY, PHOTO NZ

# Kia Ora

## Hello Summer!

Beach bliss in Northland

**Close to Home**  
Eliza McCartney's  
Devonport

**Spa Spotting**  
Melbourne city retreats

**Snap Happy**  
A Kiwi business  
goes global

