

Visions of the Central North Island



Donna Blaber



Visions of the Central North Island

PREVIEW

10 outstanding travel articles highlighting the Central North Island's places, people, lifestyle and food

Visions of New Zealand Compilation Series

By Donna Blaber

Copyright 2012:

Text & Photographs - Donna Blaber

Maps - Rupert Shaw

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding, cover or format other than that in which it is published. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior consent of the copyright owners.

The moral rights of the author have been asserted. All rights reserved.

First published in New Zealand in 2012 by Lighthouse Media Group



Lighthouse Ltd, 350 Pataua North Road,
RD5, Whangarei, 0175, New Zealand
www.lmg.co.nz

ISBN 978-1-927229-11-8 (PDF)

Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[1 Firth of Thames](#)

[2 East Coast Coromandel](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[About the Author](#)

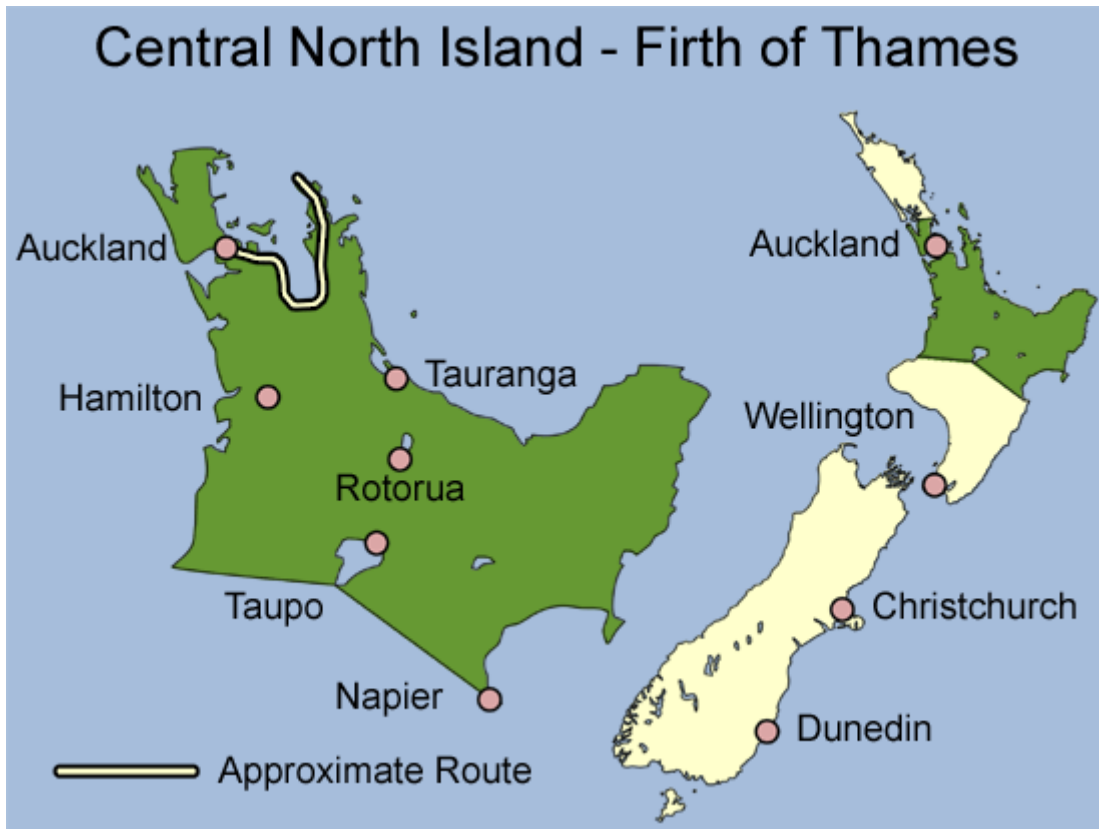
Introduction

The Central North Island is the perfect destination to take a road trip and this book provides you with a collection of 10 articles by award winning New Zealand journalist, Donna Blaber. As well as firmly grounding the reader in the Central North Island by providing a real sense of place, she highlights some of the best scenery, food and attractions to be found.

Join Donna and become inspired as she explores the beauty of the Central North Island, meeting quirky local characters, and revealing all her favourite places to eat and rest, both on and off the beaten track.

The content of this book provides ideal background reading for anyone planning to visit the Central North Island of New Zealand.

1. Firth of Thames



Coromandel township

I'd willingly wager that few cities around the globe boast a world-renowned, 8500-hectare, intertidal sanctuary for migratory birds just an hour's drive from the CBD. Avoid the rush-hour crush, and the cruise south-east from Auckland along the stunning Seabird Coastline is spectacular, for here, flanked by the dark green forests of the Hunua Ranges, the tarmac begins its U-shaped journey around the Firth of Thames. From Kaiaua to Miranda it skims past startling-white shell banks, then zips across the pancake-flat Hauraki Plains to the Coromandel's western shore, where it twists northward, fringed by gnarled pohutukawa.

But it is much more than a great scenic drive: the Firth of Thames provides a temporary abode for thousands of migrating shorebirds that navigate their way from Eastern Siberia and the Alaskan tundra to summer in New Zealand. It's a huge journey — over 12,000 kilometres one way — to the shell banks of Miranda for a little R&R. The bar-tailed godwit and lesser knot are the most commonly sighted tourists, but many others, including the ruddy turnstone and eastern curlew, are also seen.

Miranda also plays an important role in New Zealand shorebird migration. Every year over 20,000 pied oyster-catchers return after breeding down south, along with 3,000 wrybill plover (over half the total species) and flocks of banded dotterel.

High tide is the best time to spot birds, but first visit the Miranda Shorebird Centre, north of the old township. Inside, display boards give details of migratory patterns, and also explain about the birds that breed here, such as the New Zealand dotterel, variable oyster-catcher and black-billed gull.

We pop in and meet centre manager, Keith Woodley. He is sitting by the window, sketching birds. There's not much he misses from this possie, he says, including all the Sunday drivers that pass by every weekend. A "born-again birder", Keith tells me that Miranda is amongst the top sites in the world for shorebird viewing. "It's accessible and the birds are so easily seen on the shell banks.

These shell banks comprise a series of 13 active systems found along the coastline, which together form what is known by geographers as the Miranda-Kaiaua Chenier Plain. Chenier forms when wave action pushes shell bars on the intertidal flats towards land, making high ridges. Sediment accumulates on the landward side, providing a habitat for mangroves, and building up the plain. It's a relatively rare formation worldwide, and natural land reclamation is a result. In Miranda, the two kilometre wide coastal plains have been formed since the last Ice Age. Some of the shells in the ridges by the hills have been carbon dated at a mere 3,900 years old. If you explore by foot, you'll find that the ancient cheniers range in height from one to two metres, and that some are more than four kilometres in length.

Another popular attraction, located at the western head of the Firth of Thames, is Miranda Hot Springs. The waters of these once swamp-like natural springs were first used by the Maori, then by Hauraki locals, but the site was transformed in 1959 when the largest thermal pool in the Southern Hemisphere was built.

Today, people from the district and visitors alike enjoy the pools, and temperatures range around 35-37 degrees Celsius. Families are catered for with ample picnic and BBQ areas, plus a toddlers' pool to build water confidence in the youngsters, but adults can retreat to a hotter 40-degree pool or one of four private kauri spa tubs. It's a great way to wind up the day on the beautiful Seabird Coast.

With its close proximity to Auckland, the return trip to Miranda makes a great day out, but for those who wish to linger, the region boasts several good lodges. The pick of the bunch is Rata Lodge, a luxurious retreat set on 35 acres atop Mt Rataroa.

The drive to the summit is steep, but the top we're greeted by our hosts and spectacular 360-degree views. Acre upon acre of rolling countryside surround the lodge, and the shell banks of Miranda and the broad curve of the Firth of Thames are framed by the Coromandel Ranges.

It's hard to tear your eyes away from the panorama, but once inside you find that every room makes the most of the scenery; there are wonderful views to be had from the conservatory, dining room and comfortable guest lounge, which overlooks a lotus pond.

There are three guest suites, and we stayed in the larger accommodation, which came with its own private decks, lounge, dining room, separate bedroom, ensuite bathroom and a prospect of the Firth of Thames.

The next morning, fully refreshed and keen to continue exploring, we take our leave, whizzing through Miranda and onto Waitakaruru, where two one-way bridges pass over the same river. An old-timer informs me that the army, prior to a visit by the Queen, built the second bridge. "Up in a day," he grumbles. "Don't see that now."

We turn onto State Highway 25 and pass through Pipiroa, Orongo and over a long bridge to Kopu. A short side trip leads to Matatoki Cheese, a farmhouse business owned and operated by Christine and Kelvin Haigh. The pair makes a variety of organic and non-organic cheeses that are distributed countrywide, and passersby can view the cheese-making process, enjoy a platter and buy direct.

Ten minutes later we're in Thames, a town that, back in the height of the gold boom of the 1880s, had a larger population than Auckland. A number of old buildings and relics from that era can be seen, particularly at its northern end around Grahamstown. Today, Thames is the biggest town on the Coromandel Peninsula, so there's plenty to keep visitors amused, from goldmine tours, scenic flights, canyoning and hiking, to visiting local gardens and enjoying scenic views from Totorā Pa and the War Memorial Monument. As one would expect, local arts, crafts and pottery abound.

We pop into Eco People, a large soap-making facility that creates its wares by hand. Light and airy, the shop smells divine, and its décor is based on the values of the company: responsibility, purity and luxury. As well as strict environmental targets, born witness to by a zero waste policy and recycled packaging printed with biodegradable soy ink, one of Eco People's goals is to create employment by using human energy, rather than machines.

"All our products have their own story," says Fleur Postill, as she shows me oils melting in a large kettle out the back. Later, depending on the 'flavour' of the soap, fillers like honey, jasmine or vanilla are added to the blend, before the mixture is poured into a square mould. Once set, the square is cut into blocks, strips, then bars, and placed on drying racks for four to six weeks. "It's similar to making cheese," says Fleur.

Unlike most commercial manufacturers, Eco People do not extract the glycerine to use as a byproduct in moisturisers, so the soap is rich and nourishing for your skin. Some, like the blackberry, sweet kiwifruit, feijoa and mandarin bars, smell almost edible! Novel ideas abound, such as the luxury massage bar — a pure blend of oils that is perfect for pregnant tums as they expand — and 'Washy Squashy' moulding soap for kids, which is similar to play dough but easier on the clothes and home!

A rather unusual attraction can be found in Tararu, three kilometres north of Thames. Roger and Sabine Gass's exotic tropical Butterfly and Orchid Garden is unique in the world in its particular combination of flora and fauna. The pair set up the fully enclosed butterfly garden under strict bio-security guidance, and for Roger, a landscape gardener, it was a dream come true.

Most of their butterflies come from Asia and South America, and with an average life span of around two weeks, replacement is a continuous process. We step inside to see some 400 brightly patterned pairs of wings fluttering around, oblivious to a class of excited school children. Watching their beaming faces, Sabine explains, "they love it because the butterflies show no enemy behaviour."

Continuing north, the road follows the waterline and winds through the tiny beachside settlements of Whakatete and Ngarimu Bays, Te Puru, Waiomu and Tapu, then twists through contorted pohutukawa overhanging the beach and cliffs at Te Mata, Waikawau and Kereta. Resting shags cling to salt-encrusted branches and at times the trees are so thick that the telephone lines must leave the bank and journey across the water.

The coast is left behind as we sweep up the steep hill above Deadmans Point and Manaia Harbour. A lookout at the top offers superb views north to the tip of the Coromandel Peninsula over a series of harbours and islands. To the south, the Firth of Thames is swallowed by the Hauraki Plains, while westwards, Auckland hides behind Ponui and Waiheke Islands.

We descend into Manaia and soon the sheltered waters of Coromandel Harbour stretch calmly before us. Just south of town we take the road to Te Kouma, which leads to the Sugarloaf, an all-tide wharf for mussel barges. Coromandel Town has long been renowned for its delectable green-lipped

mussels; during the 1920s and '30s, this kai moana (seafood) was dredged throughout the bay, but by the 1950s only scattered beds remained. Today, with marine farming, it's again a productive industry.

Coromandel is also a fisherperson's paradise and a number of charter boats operate these waters, including a rare tourism venture — Mussel Barge Snapper Safaris. Roy Andrews operates this operation, an interesting Coromandel local, who, after several years working on mussel farms, has an in depth understanding of the industry. The safaris offer an awesome insight into its day-to-day operations — plus there's the chance to hook a snapper, kahawai, or trevally.

The unusual local habitat makes the odds for a catch fairly good. "I mainly target operating harvesters," says Roy, "as the fish follow the 'berley trail' they leave behind."

Unlike conventional charters, the large, uncluttered decks of the renovated mussel barge offer ample room for everybody's angling techniques — including the complete novice! A large canopy provides protection from the sun (or rain) and a toilet, BBQ and gear storage are available. It takes about 30 minutes to reach the fishing grounds and once there, the barge frequently changes position. The engine noise poses no problem: the sound of machinery is like a dinner gong to the fish!

With such an abundance of seafood, only the best is served in Coromandel's popular eateries, such as the Peppertree Restaurant and Bar, Star and Garter, and Umu. Alternatively, you can smoke your own catch at the Coromandel Smoking Company, or buy fresh fish, mussels and oysters from various outlets around town.

Coromandel is home to around 1,400 keen boaties, conservationists, lifestylers and craftspeople, and dotted between its fine Victorian buildings and relics from the goldmining and timber industries, excellent design stores, such as Weta, display their artistic wares.

The Waiau Waterworks on the 309 Road features some incredibly creative feats of engineering and large sculptural pieces that sprawl over four-and-a-half acres beside a river. There are several fun rides, all powered by water to keep kids (up to the age of 80!) amused, as well as a variety of water-powered clocks, butter churns, waterwheels and intriguing pedal-powered pumps. Half the fun for the owners is recycling interesting pieces for their projects and turning them into something new. Old car parts are everywhere: a tumbler of stone features parts of a 1956 Morris Oxford; there are brake calipers on the Flying Fox.

"There's plenty for the adults here; I don't know what the kids get up to!" says a satisfied father, smiling as he passes by, family in tow.

Activity-wise, Coromandel Town offers something for everyone. You can explore old gold workings aboard an all-terrain Argo, take a train ride at Driving Creek Railway, or soak up local history at the Coromandel Stamper Battery and Coromandel Museum. The more energetic can hike in the forest; a wander through Taraire Grove and Waitati Gardens is a more relaxing option, or you can simply swim, picnic or fish on a beautiful sandy beach, like Long or Wyuna Bays.

We drive north through Papa Aroha, where a water taxi provides transport to the pretty Motukawao group of islands, and follow the coastline to Amodeo Bay and Waitete Bay. Here, the tarmac winds inland, past the Mahamudra Buddhist retreat, and Branch Creek, where Greg Taylor crafts wooden furniture. We arrive at Colville, a tiny town once a centre for kauri milling, which boasts a general store, petrol pump and café that is usually only open during the summertime.

Aside from fishing and beach pursuits, horse riding at White Star Station is popular here, and trips range from one- to two-hour rides for learners, to three to five hours and overnight treks for experienced riders.

North of Colville the route narrows and turns to gravel. A fork in the road leads to Port Charles and Sandy Bay, but we continue on the western coast, passing beneath dense, contorted pohutukawa branches and by a wharf for an old granite quarry, to Fantail Bay. Here, these great ancients shade the sand and oyster-catchers preen, while the Moehau Range towers above a Department of Conservation (DOC) camp. Port Jackson passes by in a blur, then the treacherous, winding route narrows again, and continues to Fletcher Bay, where the road finally comes to an abrupt end.

It's extremely isolated and few people are about, aside from the odd DOC camper. The brilliant views of Great Barrier Island and beautiful sands make it a great place to crash out and relax, while the more active can hike the Coromandel Walkway to Stony Bay.

Returning south the journey is equally spectacular, a reverse view of the picturesque coastline. Arriving back in Coromandel Town, we head to Karamana Homestead, a beautifully restored manor built in 1872 using wood from giant kauri trees. Karamana is hosted by Ian Franklyn and there are three attractive guestrooms to choose from in the homestead, plus a separate self-contained kauri cottage, built in the 1850s.

In the morning, after a hearty pancake breakfast, we cruise to the Stamper Battery to soak up more local history. Gold was discovered nearby at Driving Creek in 1852, and this lovingly restored battery, owned by the government and erected in 1898, was the first to be built in the North Island. Here, metal and ore were tested in conjunction with the School of Mines to determine the quality of their ingredients. Today, the battery and its 25-foot, river-powered waterwheel are still fully operational, and tours of the facility run on the hour, from 10.30am to 3.30pm daily.

A trip to Coromandel is not complete without visiting Driving Creek Railway, a 35-year-old project still evolving under the direction and energy of Barry Brickell, a highly creative local potter, railway builder, part-time writer — and a lot more besides.

A colourful and well-known local, Barry says that he never intended his railway to become a tourist attraction. The venture began back in the good old days when money could be made from well-turned pottery. The first sections of track were built to gain all-weather access to clay and fuel, but when business took a downturn, Barry opened the pottery studios, railway and trains to the public, to help pick up the tab.

Three trains (all built onsite) now carry visitors along a narrow-gauge 15-inch track, which winds up the hills behind the potteries. Amazing feats of engineering can be seen enroute: a double-decker viaduct, tunnels and spirals. The track zigzags its way to the 'Eyeful Tower', an amazing wooden terminus with truly eye-popping views of Coromandel Town, the Firth of Thames, Waiheke, Ponui and the Motukawao Group. On a clear day, Auckland can be seen in the distance.

While you take in the spectacle, the history is told of the railway and potteries, including Barry's forest restoration project, which over the last 35 years has seen more than 15,000 native trees planted on the 22-hectare block. "I want to return the land to its original state, pre the kauri-logging days," Barry explains.

Plans are also on the horizon to provide an old-fashioned refreshment counter at the tower. "Nothing flash, but we'll serve it in our own pottery mugs. Trouble is, you can't have tea without a pee," he says with a sideways grin, "so we'll need to make some composting toilets."

His eyes take on a faraway look. "Yes, that's it," he finally prophesises. "It'll make great fertiliser for the native tree project..."



School of Mines, Coromandel

My favourite places to stay

Rata Lodge

30 Rataroa Road, Miranda
09 232 7899
www.ratalodge.co.nz

Miranda Hot Springs Holiday Park

595 Front Miranda Road, Miranda
07 867 3205
www.mirandaholidaypark.co.nz

Fletcher Bay DOC Campsite

07 867 9080
Fletcher Bay, Coromandel
www.doc.govt.nz

Fantail Bay DOC Campsite

07 867 9080
Fantail Bay, Coromandel
www.doc.govt.nz

Karamana Homestead

84 Whangapoua Road, Coromandel
06 866 7138
www.karamanahomestead.com

My favourite places to eat

Peppertree Restaurant and Bar

31 Kapanga Road, Coromandel
07 866 8211

Umu

22 Wharf Road, Coromandel
07 866 8618

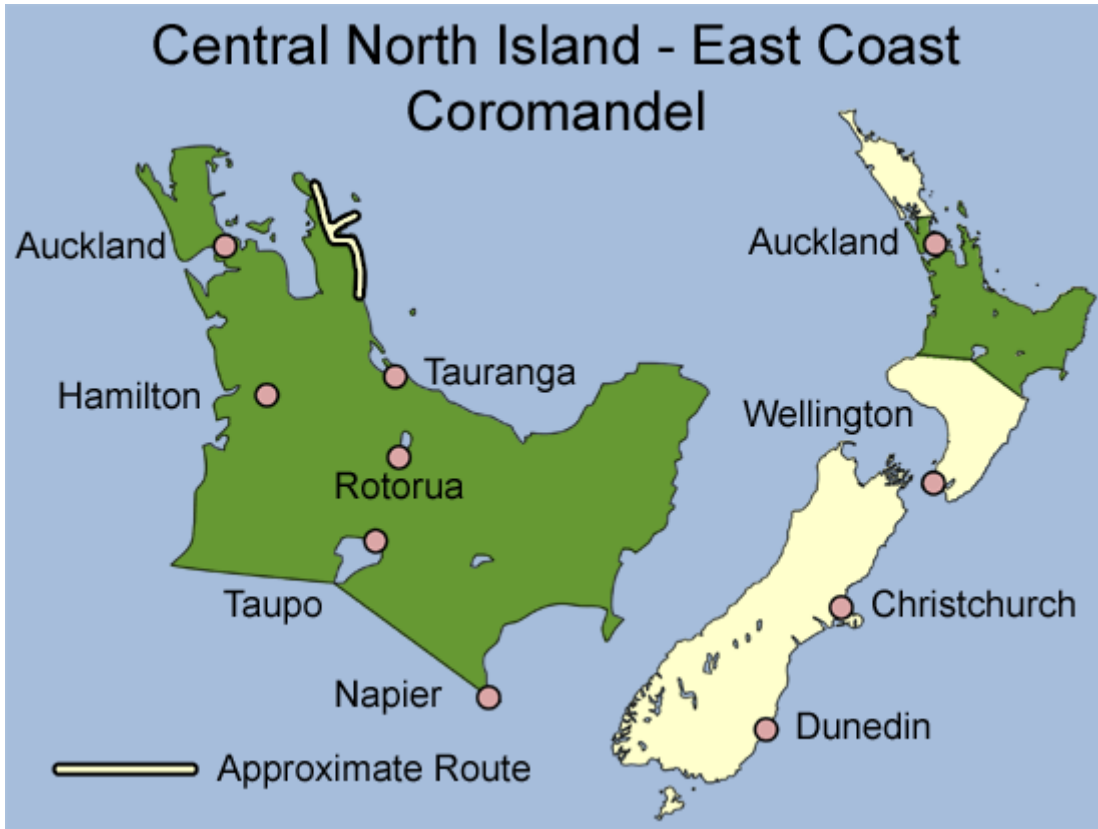
Kaiaua Fisheries Restaurant and Takeaways

09 232 2776
East Coast Road, Kaiaua



Argo rides at Coromandel township

2. East Coast Coromandel



Opito Bay

A canopy of trees provides some shady relief from the sun as it beats down from an intensely blue sky; ahead, the bitumen blurs into a glassy haze. We're purring along the coast between Whitianga and Whangamata, a shoreline that has long been a favourite playground for holidaying Kiwis — a place where traditional summer pastimes, such as fishing, diving, boating, hiking and beachcombing, abound.

Its picturesque coastline provides long stretches of sandy ocean beaches as well as small, deep coves, with views punctuated by offshore islands, among them Mayor, Slipper and Shoe. Some, such as the Aldermen Islands and Mercury groups (with the exception of Great Mercury) are managed as nature reserves, pest-free paradises where tuatara, and the robust and Whitaker's skinks are safe. Landing is prohibited to minimise the spread of predators, disease and weeds.

Whitianga is the main hub for marine-based activities because just to the south of the town is Te Whanganui A Hei Marine Reserve, which stretches from Cooks Bluff and Motukoruro Island through to Hahei and Mahurangi Island. The area provides a rich and varied habitat for sea creatures and plants, and its terrain ranges from intricate sea caves and massive blowholes through to underwater arches and reefs.

What today are islands were once volcanic domes on a forested plain — at least until the sea rose 10,000 years ago. The coastline was formed seven to eight million years previously when a series of explosive volcanic eruptions resulted in the layering of pumice, ash and lava. Over time, the constant weathering and uneven erosion of the softer pumice and ash layers has formed distinctive geological landmarks like Cathedral Cove, a collapsed cave archway, which today is the region's central draw card.

Cathedral Cove is accessible by foot from Hahei, the closest holiday settlement, or by boat from Whitianga or Hahei. It takes about 30 minutes to walk to the cove one way from the car park, the steep track winding downhill past Gemstone and Stingray Bays, then climbing up above the cliffs of Cathedral Cove before its descent down to the sea.

It's a steep hike, and once there you won't want to hurry back, so be sure to pack lunch so you can picnic amongst the pohutukawa that line the beach from top to toe. For the return journey, a shadier route via the puriri tree forest is a good option.

Paddling is another popular way to reach the cove, and Cathedral Kayaks provide the necessary gear — not to mention lattes on the beach! Judging by the scores of backpackers that return to Hahei's shores shortly after midday, it's a popular and convenient stop on their circuit.

We join six others aboard the Hahei Explorer, a sturdy five metre, custom-made speedboat, powered by a 90 Yamaha. The Explorer takes in more than just Cathedral Cove, covering a large region around the islands of the marine reserve and south to the giant sea caves and spectacular blowhole by Hot Water Beach. The latter can only be reached by sea as there is no access via the adjacent private land.

IF YOU ENJOYED THIS PREVIEW, THEN PLEASE CONSIDER
SUPPORTING THE AUTHOR BY BUYING THE BOOK.

www.lmg.co.nz/ebooks.html

Further Reading

There are other titles written by Donna Blaber in the Visions of New Zealand Series.

Readers who enjoyed this book and who are interested in other titles published by Lighthouse Media Group are invited to visit our website.

www.lmg.co.nz

Join us on Facebook to be informed of new book releases and special offers for our friends.

www.facebook.com/LighthouseMediaGroup

About the Author

Donna Blaber is a full-time writer and qualified journalist living in New Zealand. Her "Visions of New Zealand" series of books is her first foray into the world of self-publishing through her company, Lighthouse Media Group. However, having authored 15 non-fiction books about New Zealand over the past eight years for various national and international publishers, she says it is a natural progression to self-publish her own New Zealand titles.

"The Visions of New Zealand series is the result of more than 15 years research and experience, both on the road and writing about New Zealand," says Donna. "The purpose of these books is that I really want to provide visitors to New Zealand with an in-depth read – something that goes well beyond a basic guidebook format. I want readers to really be able to imagine the activities, the places, the food and wine, the people, and the lifestyle on offer in New Zealand before they arrive, so they can get the very most out of their visit."

Donna has spent a great deal of her life travelling and exploring other countries and says this travel experience has helped guide her in her New Zealand travel writing work. These days, with her twin daughters and husband in tow, most family holidays are currently taken in New Zealand, which Donna says has given another edge to her work. "We began travelling as a family to various destinations within New Zealand shortly after the girls were born, so I can happily recite everything from the location of every restroom nappy changing facility through to all the best playgrounds and short walks for little legs!" she laughs.

Donna looks forward to connecting with her readers. "I'm really looking forward to sharing this journey together," she says.

<http://www.donnablaber.com>