

# **Visions of the Lower North Island**



**Donna Blaber**



# **Visions of the Lower North Island**

## **PREVIEW**

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

Visions of New Zealand Compilation Series

By Donna Blaber

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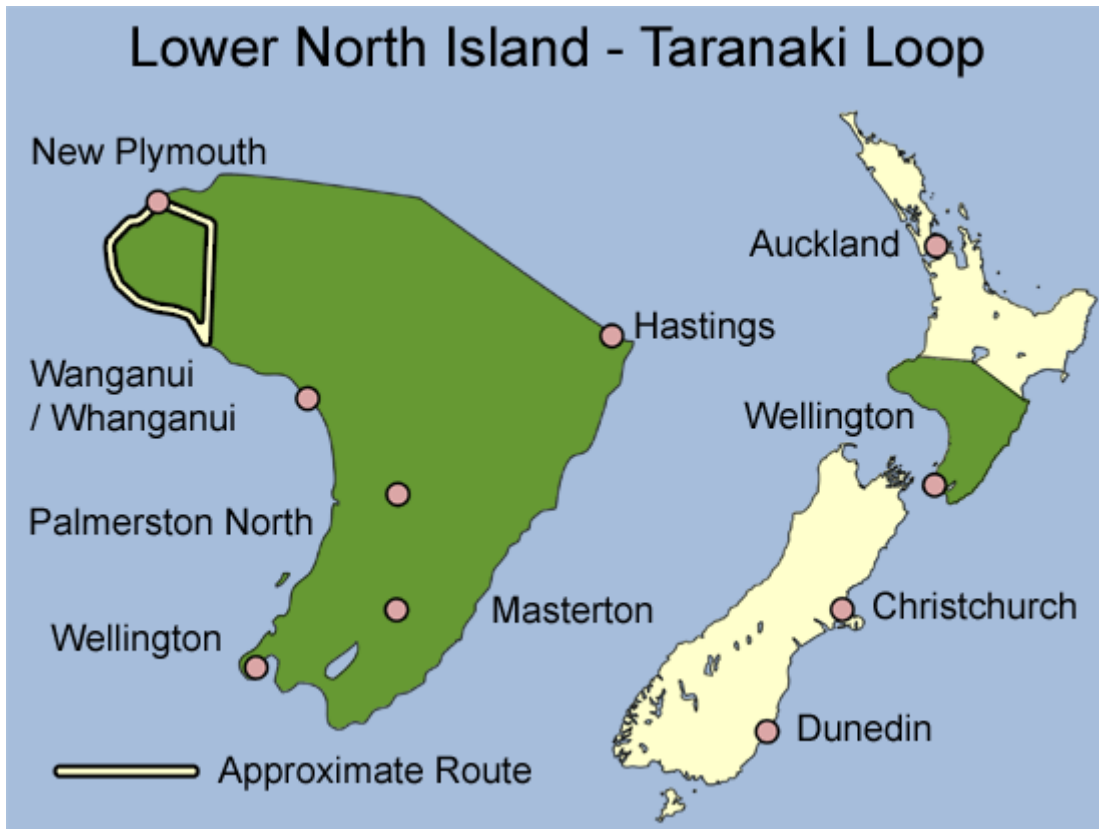
## **Introduction**

The Lower 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 Lower 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 Lower 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 Lower North Island of New Zealand.

## 9. Taranaki Loop



*Mount Taranaki*

I reckon that back in New Zealand's early days the Central Plateau's fairest maiden, Pihanga, had it pretty sweet. Surrounded by a number of admiring suitors, she had the pick of the lot: red-hot Tongariro, strong Mt Edgecumbe, suave Mt Tauhara and gentle, zen-like Mt Taranaki — a choice that would put any modern gal into a tailspin. But Pihanga was one of a rare breed; she knew her own mind. She favoured the sizzling Tongariro, and while majestic Ruapehu and sultry Ngauruhoe looked on in wonder, it was he who won her heart after a fierce battle.

So the defeated mountains departed despondently from the central plateau. Mt Edgecumbe and Tauhara travelled north to warmer climes, while Mt Taranaki (who was terribly cut up over the whole affair) fled west towards the setting sun, his sheer bulk carving the Whanganui River enroute, which he filled with tears.

The mountain came to settle in Taranaki, a region that embraced him and has provided a rejuvenating environment ever since, in which he can convalesce. The rhythmic pounding of the ocean soothes his shattered ego, the strong westerly wind blows away the cobwebs and clears his mind, and the clouds provide a thick cover for him to hide under when he's feeling morose. But sometimes, when the day dawns bright and clear, Mt Taranaki tosses aside his woes and holds his head high, parading his magnificent torso and icy crown for all to see.

But the day we arrive in New Plymouth, the mountain is battling with his emotions, and there's a strong westerly wind that brings with it heavy showers interspersed with patches of sunshine, and only the rare glimpse of his impressive being.

Nevertheless, down at the New Plymouth Surf Riders' Club the locals are happy because a good swell rolls in and today is the monthly Young Surfers' Competition. The club, set up by Wayne Arthur (dubbed Arch around here), is a family affair where age and gender are irrelevant. Sausages sizzle on the BBQ, families sprawl on blankets in the club grounds, and teenagers and old salty types mingle companionably as they wax down their surfboards. "Everybody's welcome," says Arch.

This region has long been a popular surfing haunt as its bulbous coastline, tucked firmly around two-thirds of Mt Taranaki, provides New Zealand's most consistent conditions. There are literally hundreds of point breaks, and to gain access, one must travel the legendary Surf Highway, State Highway 45, which horseshoes around the coast from New Plymouth to Hawera before connecting with State Highway 3.

Eager to explore this renowned route, we leave town bound for Oakura, famed for both its left- and right-hand breaks, and a popular spot with those learning to surf. And there's no better way to find out if you're a natural-born surfer than to go for a tandem ride with Greg Page. As a small boy growing up in Southern California, Greg first learnt with his father, balancing on the front of his board. We find him at the beach riding waves with his own daughter Taryn, and her best friend, Lucy.

"Standing isn't hard — but choosing the right way to get up is!" says Greg, after he and Taryn glide effortlessly to the beach. An upright position is the first step for wannabe surfers, something that a tandem ride makes more readily accessible. You have your instructor with you each step of the way, first guiding the board out back, and then providing tuition so you can both ride the waves in. Anybody can give it a go on Greg's custom-made four metre surfboard; it's extremely stable and can handle small waves close to the shore.

"It's great for those who feel apprehensive about surfing. We work on building their confidence and then, if they're good swimmers, we can go out the back to the more challenging waves," says Greg.

Accommodating an extra body is no hindrance to Greg — so keen is he on sharing the experience that he's even surfed on a 28-foot board with 13 others! Constructed by local surfboard maker, Dave Smithers, it was made as a signpost to stand outside Vertigo, Oakura's busy surf-gear and mountain-hire shop. "Before it was mounted they decided to get an entry in the Guinness Book of Records," says Greg. "So we all got together and rode it in."

The huge icon on the main street can't be missed, and once inside Vertigo, you'll find photographs and newspaper clippings of the achievement, along with loads of groovy gear.

As Oakura fades in the rear-vision mirror, we head slightly inland past Lucy's Gully as the Surf Highway nudges the Kaitake Ranges and then Egmont National Park, with its 300 kilometre network of walking tracks.

Nearby in Okato, the Stony River Walk provides another opportunity to stretch your legs, or, during the summer, swim in crystal-clear waterholes. We continue onwards however, through lush green pastures that are so vivid to the eye that I find myself squinting. The region boasts some 2,700 dairy farms and its fertile pastures stretch for miles over the plains that ring the mountain — long past Stent Road, a legendary surf break which gives superb right-handers in westerly, southwest and northwest swells. It's so popular that the road sign has become a coveted trophy, so in its stead (in true Taranaki style!) is a painted boulder to point the way. We note that the Kumara Patch is also signpost-less as we pass by, but that doesn't stop the converted from swarming here in a southwest swell when awesome left-handers peel perfectly towards the shore for 150 metres!

On we continue to Pungarehu, turning right at the school where a narrow sealed road leads through an unusual landscape — all bobbly hills and cabbage trees — to the elegant silhouette that is the Cape Egmont lighthouse. With Mt Taranaki in the background, the tall beacon, which has signalled its warning to ships since 1881, makes a great holiday snap for the album on a sunny day.

But the moody mountain will not smile for my camera, so instead we make the pilgrimage to Parihaka to visit the monument to the memory of Te Whiti-O-Rongomai, and pay our respects to this great chief who died here on the 18th November, 1907, aged 90 years. Back in the 1870s, when Europeans settled and built roads on lands the British had confiscated from the Maori after the Taranaki Wars, Te Whiti encouraged peaceful protest among his people.

His campaign of passive resistance and civil disobedience came to an end at Parihaka on the 5th November, 1881, when he was arrested. Earlier that day hundreds of soldiers and militia had marched to the pa ready for battle. Instead, they were met by rows of children singing and dancing. As Te Whiti was led away he remained strong, telling his assembled followers, some 2,000 Maori, "...be you steadfast in all that is peaceful". Nevertheless, his words had no impact upon the troops who were keen for a tussle. In one of New Zealand's darkest moments they raped and assaulted Maori gathered at the pa; crops were destroyed, homes ransacked and the slightest hint of resistance met with arrest.

My mood is sombre as we drive away, echoing that of the great mountain. Perhaps Mt Taranaki is no longer so sad about the fair maiden Pihanga, but mourns the misery witnessed at his feet.

The strong westerly wind brings a patch of sunshine as we pass through Rahotu, and by Oaonui, my mood has lifted again. Here we catch a glimmer of Taranaki's \$2 billion energy industry at the Maui Production Station visitor centre.

It was on this boulder-strewn shoreline — which also surprisingly boasts a boat ramp and an active fishing club — that Dave, Opunake's barber, once discovered a message in a bottle. "I found it on Kina Road Beach," he says when I pop into his salon. "It was sent by a guy in the South African Navy." Quite a talking piece, the bottle is now on display in his shop. "People come to see it — but most are here for a haircut. One of my clients travels all the way from Huntly," he proudly tells me.

Dave's establishment, complete with a stripy pole, is right beside an Opunake landmark building, the eye-catching Everybody's Theatre, home also to a good, old-fashioned Kiwi tearoom. It's all community run, and movies change weekly and play every Friday and Sunday night. Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Chaplin are amongst those gracing its billboards and the interior is charming, with its old-style movie chairs and posters.

Colourful murals, commissioned by the Arts Council and painted by Dennis Lattimer, dress the town from top to toe. The effect is extremely uplifting on a grey day — as is the latte I enjoy at the Sugar Juice Café, with its eclectic collection of furniture. After, we take a wander around an old antique shop where much-loved Fun Ho toys and antiques are intermingled between pots and pans. We pass Dingle's Surfboard Repairs where Craig Dingle is hard at work sanding, then trot along to visit the Soap Factory. Here everything is done from scratch, right down to the extracts for the herbal range. "I even use seaweed from the bay," the soapmaker confides as she stamps the imprint of a rose onto another bar.



With soaps starting at \$1.25, there's something here for everyone, even the kids looking for a nice gift for Mum. "Oh, I try to keep my prices down," she says with a smile when I remark on the cost.

Soon we're back on the Surf Highway, winging our way through Pihama, past the old Post Office building which, according to its sign, had served the community for 100 years (its fate sealed no doubt by the demise of the local dairy and cheese factories); past the Lizzie Bell Memorial Cemetery and Oeo, and then on to Otakeho, now marked only by the disintegrating general store of H.J. Eaves, established in 1875.

In nearby Manaia however, an air of greater prosperity hovers. There on the grass of its octagon-shaped roundabout is a freshly painted band rotunda and two granite war memorial obelisks. The old town buildings surround this centrepiece, and wide streets radiate out from here, leading inland, up the mountain to Dawson Falls, and out to the coast to popular Kaupokonui Beach. Dubbed the 'bread capital' of New Zealand, Manaia is home to Yarrow's, a family-owned bakery which has operated since 1923 under three generations of the same family. Their buttery hand-rolled croissants and Danish pastries are delicious, and after sampling a few, we cross the road to the chemist and find that it offers some unusual wares. As well as the expected range of pharmaceutical items, it also stocks a large collection of designer-branded teddy bears!

Another interesting experience awaits us in Hawera at Kevin Wasley's Elvis Presley Museum. We've jacked up a convenient time to meet him as this is a private collection and appointments are essential. When we pull alongside the kerb, 'KD', as he's known in these parts, is polishing his pride and joy: a powder-blue 1972 Cadillac he sourced in Texas. "But Presley's was painted in gold," he says, grinning for the camera.

KD's collection kicked off in 1959 when he was 14 years old. "I watched all the early rock and roll movies," he said, "and I liked everything about Elvis — his hairstyle and his clothes." So much so, that he even began to dress like the King (mufti days at Hawera High School would have been interesting!), something that he still continues to do.

We step inside his garage, and it's like a shrine, with the floors, ceiling and walls absolutely plastered in Elvis pictures, posters and newspaper cuttings. Amongst the numerous items in his collection are old LP covers, signed records and albums from around the world, photos, posters, number plates, cuff links, a jumble of replica clothes and endless other memorabilia. "It's my tribute to the man," he tells me.

The day is fast drawing to a close so we take our leave and journey to Tairoa Lodge on the fringe of the town, a beautiful two-storey kauri villa built in 1875 for Isaac Bailey. Linda and Steve Morrison, who restored the home to its former glory, are our hosts. They have swept away old brown carpets to reveal original kauri floorboards, repaired bay windows and verandahs, and scrubbed out and refilled the swimming pool, which had seen no water for 10 years. Linda says their inspiration for the project came after spending their wedding night at Henwood House, an historic home in New Plymouth. "It was just so romantic," she said.

Tairoa Lodge exudes the same warmth. Two spacious and immaculately decorated guest suites, the Blyth and Bailey, are located upstairs, while a private guest lounge on the lower level provides a comfortable place to relax. Across the hallway is the dining room where Linda serves pre-arranged dinners and a cooked breakfast. For families, or those looking for complete solitude, a cottage located some distance from the main house provides alternative accommodation.

Linda is on hand throughout the day to ensure guests are comfortable, while Steve works for Fonterra, the largest single-site dairy plant in the country. The next day, after a breakfast fit for a king, that is where we head, cruising the short distance to Dairyland, the company's interactive display centre.

The dairy industry has played a major role in Taranaki's past. The first co-operative factories opened in Inglewood and Opunake in 1885, and during the 1890s, the region's population grew faster than anywhere else in New Zealand. The advent of milk tankers came in 1956, and less than 20 years later, around 115 dairy factories in the province had closed down as the economy changed with the advent of this large centralised service.

At Dairyland there's lots of information about the industry and there's plenty to keep everyone entertained, with touch-sensitive computer screens, life-size models, and videos that play inside real vats. There's even a simulated tanker ride!

Other popular pastimes in Hawera include a trip to the Water Tower on High Street, which provides excellent views of the vibrantly green Taranaki countryside, and Tawhiti Museum, hailed as one of the best private museums in New Zealand. The brainchild of ex-art teacher, Nigel Ogle, its galleries recreate many aspects of early life in South Taranaki, from the Maori-European land wars to the struggles of the dairy industry. Nigel presents history in a unique way by using a series of life-like models that he makes by hand. Larger figures are placed in the foreground to give each scene a sense of depth. "I've always been really interested in New Zealand's history, right from very young," says Nigel when we swing by, "but it has taken a lot of research to get each story right."

Nearby in Eltham, history is best appreciated on foot. The town has a wealth of Edwardian and Victorian buildings that centre on Bridge Street, and the free brochure 'Historic Eltham', available at most Taranaki i-Site Information Centres, provides a good guide. In Bridger Park, a quirky wall smothered in children's toys will amuse kids, while the cut-price cheese and tastings on offer at Mainland's Cheese Bar will impress adults.

Eleven kilometres later we stumble across Stratford's Clock Tower, New Zealand's only glockenspiel, where the tragedy of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet unfolds to the peal of bells at 10am, 1pm and 3pm daily. The town, named after Shakespeare's birthplace, was originally known as Stratford-on-Patea; today, 67 streets are named after characters from his plays. Other popular attractions in Stratford include the heritage walk, the Taranaki Pioneer Village, and the drive to East Egmont's Manganui Ski Field.

Inglewood is our next stop, home of the Fun Ho Toy Museum. Like Buzzy Bees, Fun Ho toys are classic, well loved pieces of kiwiana, and the odd original tractor or two can still be found, lurking in sandpits on the quarter acre. The factory, which once employed up to 200 workers, closed down in 1987 due to competition from cheap imported toys, but Barry Young, an ex-factory worker, assembled a full collection and opened the museum in 1990 on its original premises. Today there's even a repair service available for those dug out of the garden!

From Inglewood it's only a short drive to New Plymouth along State Highway 3. We stop at Lake Mangamahoe along the way to see if we can catch the reflection of Mt Taranaki in the lake, but to no avail. Instead, we head directly to the Nice Hotel on Brougham Street in New Plymouth for an early check in, before heading out to see what New Plymouth has to offer.

The city has several excellent natural attractions, such as the 25-hectare Pukekura Park and neighbouring Brooklands, with its impressive rhododendron dells, a 2,000-year-old puriri tree, extensive lawns, ferneries, colourful gardens and boat lake. Alternatively, visitors can hike the seven kilometre coastal walkway that runs from Port Taranaki to Lake Rotomanu; explore the Nga Motu Sugar Loaf Islands Marine Park, a migration route for humpback whales between August and September; or visit the Taranaki Mineral Pools, where you can soak in 27,000-year-old thermal waters.

Further out of town, nestled amongst 360 hectares of primeval rainforest, is the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust, an internationally renowned garden featuring one of the largest collections of pure and hybrid rhododendrons and azaleas in the world. A popular time to visit is during Taranaki's annual Rhododendron and Garden Festival in October. The 10 day celebration, which traditionally starts at Labour weekend, features a large number of gardens and attractions, and has become an annual pilgrimage for keen gardeners.

Information on the festival and other activities in Taranaki can be picked up at Puke Ariki, a unique library, museum and information centre housed inside an impressive piece of architecture opposite the Len Lye wind-wand sculpture on the foreshore — another good reason to visit. At Puke Ariki you can learn more of the stories of the region, including the sorrowful legend of their mountain.

As we leave and head back to the Nice Hotel, the sun makes an unexpected appearance. Suddenly I spy Taranaki's great-granddaddy staring at me from the rear-vision mirror. He stands proud and strong,

parading his magnificent torso for all to see. I watch as a cloud briefly shadows his icy crown, and as he shakes it free, I understand something about heart and soul of the region: it's as solid as a rock, whatever the past has thrown at it, and no matter what the future will bring.



*Everybodys Theatre, Opunake*

## **My favourite places to stay**

### **Tairoa Lodge**

3 Puawai Street, Hawera

06 278 8603

[www.tairoa-lodge.co.nz](http://www.tairoa-lodge.co.nz)

### **Araheke Cottage**

1346 Egmont Road, Egmont Village

07 752 2722

### **Nice Hotel**

71 Brougham Street, New Plymouth

06 758 6423

[www.nicehotel.co.nz](http://www.nicehotel.co.nz)

## My favourite places to eat

### **Sugar Juice Café**

43 Tasman Street, Opunake  
06 361 7062

### **Table Restaurant (at Nice Hotel)**

71 Brougham Street, New Plymouth  
06 758 6423

### **Andre L'Escargot Restaurant**

37 Brougham Street, New Plymouth  
06 758 4812

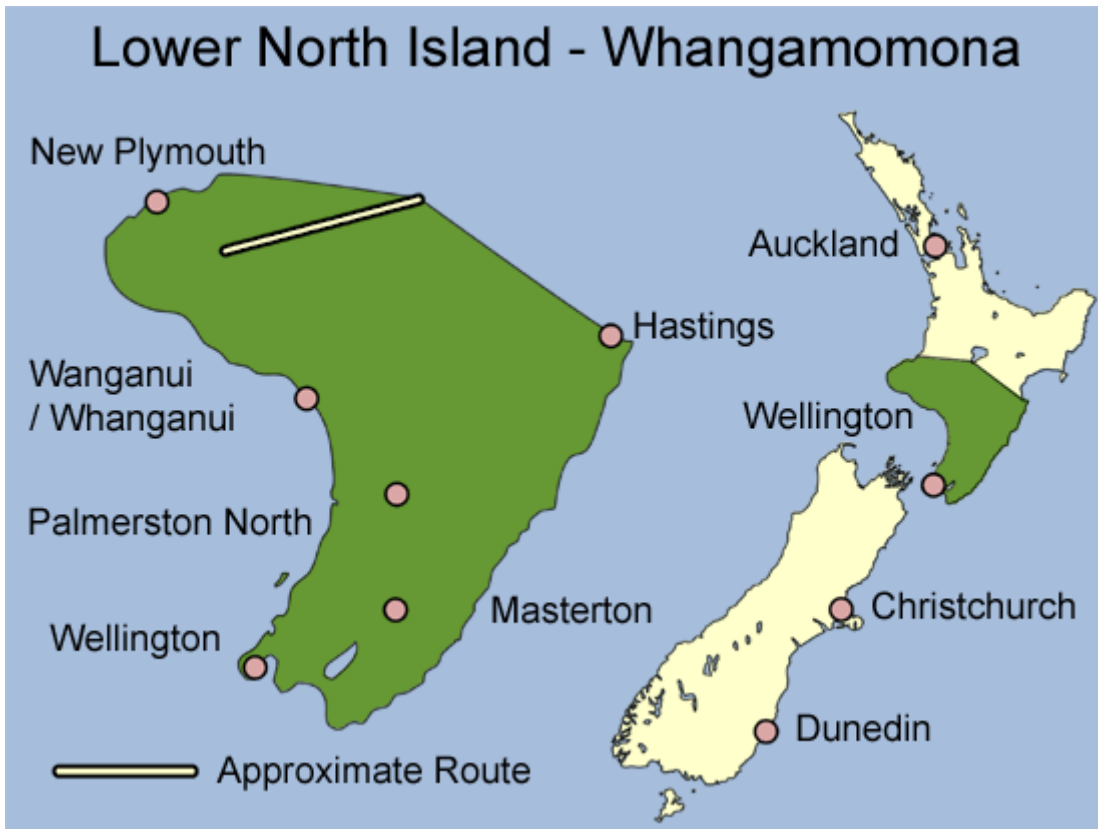
### **Okurukuru Winery**

738 Surf Highway (State Highway 45)  
Oakura  
06 751 0787



*Opunake Beach*

## 10. Whangamomona



*Taranaki Pioneer Village*

"Whanga-mo-oh-where?" asked friends when I said I was planning on driving through Whangamomona. Although some call it the Forgotten Highway, this route is well known by folks living in Stratford, such as my hosts, Tash and Brendan, at Platinum Lodge. The pair often drives this way enroute to the Central Plateau during winter months, with family, skis, and boards in tow. I do wonder quite why they make the pilgrimage, however, what with Mt Taranaki parading his magnificent snowy self right on their doorstep.

Tash and Brendan are farmers, whose purpose-built lodge was constructed on the site of an old cowshed.

"I kept coming here and thinking it was such a waste of an amazing view," said Tash, who was the driving force behind the build. "It was a small idea that just grew."

After lots of research, mostly constituting weekends away, and staying in primo places to see what they liked best, Tash sold her hairdressing business in Stratford to fund their venture. The final effect is stunning: modern yet simple. Each of the lodge's studio guestrooms faces Mt Taranaki; each has its own private patio, with sliding doors leading from the ensuites so you can recline in a deep spa bath while enjoying panoramic mountain views.

In addition, a covered passageway leads to Tash's new salon — all within the lodge complex — so guests can even book in for a cut and colour if they wish. And, as if that's not enough of a drawcard, there's also an adjoining day spa offering a range of treatments. You can peruse its menu from the comfort of your room, and choose from de-stressing massages, body wraps, manicures, pedicures ... and so the list goes on.

What's more (as I discover before tackling the Whanga-mo-oh-where), Stratford, a town named after Shakespeare's birthplace, has plenty to offer visitors including the Taranaki Pioneer Village, which provides a thoroughly enjoyable experience. The local historical society has collected old buildings and restored them where necessary, then furnished them with authentic and original décor, thus recreating an entire settlement: a garage, baker's, police station, bungalows, and an old school house. Strolling along the streets, we feel as though we're on a 1950s' film set, so detailed is the recreation of a past era.

We encounter a couple in their sixties at the school house. "It's just how it used to be," they enthuse.

But it's the Forgotten Highway that has lured me to these parts, a winding 155 kilometre heritage trail flanked by the railroad that runs between Stratford to Taumarunui. It's a journey of remembrance, a reminder of the determined settlers who tried — and in some cases failed — to scratch a living from this isolated hill country. There are several historic attractions to see enroute, including disused coalmines, old bridges, tunnels, and riverboat landings, and although it's only a three-hour drive all up, to make the most of it, you really need to allow a full day.

And so it is, refreshed from a stay at Platinum Lodge, that we set off early in the morning, armed with the informative Forgotten World Highway brochure, which details the attractions to be found enroute.

IF YOU ENJOYED THIS PREVIEW, THEN PLEASE CONSIDER  
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## 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.

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## 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>