

Visions of Northland



Donna Blaber



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PREVIEW

10 outstanding travel articles highlighting Northland's places, people, lifestyle and food

Visions of New Zealand Compilation Series

By Donna Blaber

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Text & Photographs - Donna Blaber

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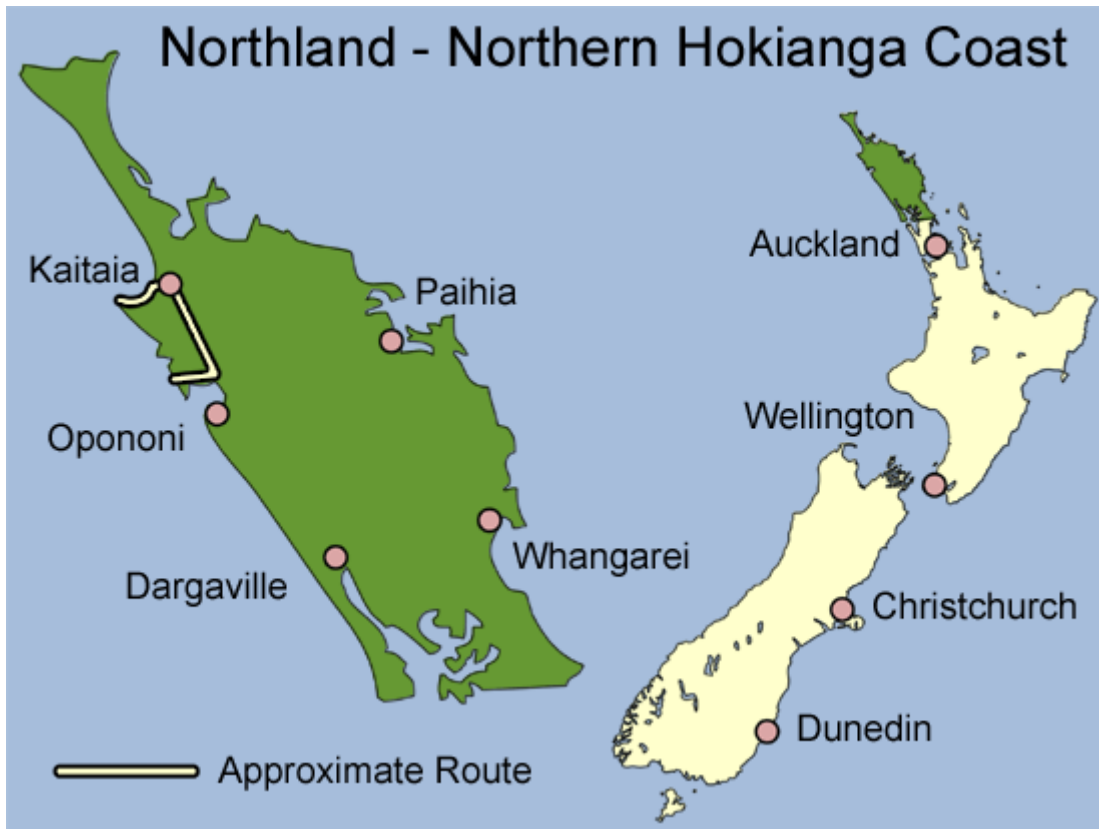
Introduction

Northland 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 Northland 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 Northland, 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 Northland region of New Zealand.

3. Northern Hokianga Coast



Ninety Mile Beach from Ahipara

The tide waits for nobody: man nor beast, god nor king. Nor vehicle, for that matter, I reflect, as I stand barefoot on a wild stretch of beach, braced against a salty westerly wind. In front of me is a rusty wreck that simply failed to make it around the point in time. Entombed by sand, it's a sharp reminder to visitors and those who live in this isolated West Coast hamlet that beach travel must cease at least one hour before high tide.

Driving on the beach is common here — in fact it's central to daily life — for where the winding gravel road leading to Mitimiti reaches its conclusion, the beach highway takes over. Travel south along its silica sands, past massive ochre-coloured dunes, and you'll hit the entrance to the Hokianga Harbour, where the Tasman Sea demands attention, pounding upon sandbars; head north and you're flanked by the misty, kauri-covered peaks of the Warawara Forest.

The locals have their favourite fishing spots and can be seen along the way, surfcasting, or gathering kai moana from the rocks. Needless to say, fishing is good in these parts, and one of the region's most popular activities is drag netting for schools of mullet. It's a classic slice of Mitimiti life; local Maori have been catching these fish in the much the same way for hundreds of years on this wild ocean beach.

Fortuitously, Tipu and Sally Cash, our hosts at Mitimiti Beach House — this is where we're staying — are drag-netting experts who give lessons to the uninitiated. In the late afternoon we join them on an incoming tide to try our luck. As we set off down the beach, Tipu, who is scouring the surf for jumping mullet, tells us that the best time to catch these slippery fish is around mid-tide when they're feeding on plankton.

"Sometimes we'll catch the odd trevally or kahawai," he adds.

He spots a likely place, so we jump out and haul the net into the surf. At least two people are required to drag-net successfully. As one person walks out into the surf to waist deep and holds the net in place, the second wades through the water, slowly letting out the rest from the fish bin, and beating on the surface of the water as they go. Then the net must be kept as close to the seabed as possible while both fisher-people slowly return to the shore. The pounding surf makes it a lot harder to set a net than it sounds, but after a couple of attempts — and sticking to Tipu's rule: never hit the same place twice — we've pulled a decent catch ashore.

Tipu goes to wash and fillet the fish in a stream, the Moetangi, which passes right by the beach house, all the while watched by Puss-puss the cat, Bob the dog, several ducks, and a pet eel — patiently waiting for their share.

"Not a scrap is wasted. Everyone gets a feed and goes away smiling," laughs Tipu.

If there's a large catch (three dozen or more), Tipu fires up the smoker; otherwise the fish is eaten pan-fried, or made into a local favourite, fish broth. It's an easy recipe that simply involves cutting the fish in half, then boiling it with an onion.

But as Tipu and Sally enjoy eating their mullet pan-fried in an equal mix of butter and oil, we try doing the same, placing the fish on fresh bread, with lashings of freshly squeezed lemon and salt on top. It's divine — totally different to common river mullet, which is often used in New Zealand as bait.

A pleasant evening of sunset watching and card playing follows, and we awake the next morning to the sound of horses cantering on the beach. On Maori land animals customarily roam freely as it is not fenced — with the exception of gardens, like those of Mitimiti Beach House, where it's Sally's carefully tended organic vegetables that are corralled, not the horses! Most families in the area own at least one horse, but Tipu and Sally have five, and happily organise treks for guests who are keen to ride.

Tipu works part-time as a caretaker at Matihetihe School (roll: 35 pupils), but employment is hard to come by in these parts. When this enterprising couple moved back here 20 odd years ago, they quickly realised it was essential to create their own jobs; thus, Mitimiti Beach House began its life as a Kiwi bach getaway, with prices that are well within reach of the average family. It's the perfect holiday escape for those who love the great outdoors and want to have plenty of space to do their own thing. Even at its busiest, the whole beach is yours.

"It's relatively untouched since there are so few people living here," says Sally. "It's like a step back in time."

At first glance it could seem like there's not a lot to do here, but this couldn't be further from the truth. Head north on a four kilometre hike up the beach and you'll find the Golden Stairs Walkway and the entrance to the Pawarenga Harbour; further hikes are also on offer in the nearby Warawara Forest, where in recent times the Department of Conservation (DOC) discovered several unique species of plants and freshwater fish. The beautiful Ngatuna waterfall, which spills from a high, rocky shelf in the forest, can be seen from the beach, and is reached by following the stream that flows from it inland.

An 11 kilometre drive south leads to the massive ochre-dunes of the northern Hokianga, where there are sand sculptures, canyons, springs, and waterfalls to explore. Old Maori middens (a rubbish bin of sorts, generally consisting of large piles of shells, leftovers from feasts of old) are everywhere; bird-bone hooks and rock sinkers are often found, along with gizzard stones, which provide evidence that moa roamed these dunes in the past.

The region is steeped in history, both Maori and European. Tipu shows us the spring at Tokota Point where the great explorer, Kupe, is reputed to have quenched his thirst before he returned to Hawaiki. It is believed that his canoe, Ngatuki Matawhourua, is buried beneath the dunes.

Tipu is a gifted storyteller. He regales us with the exploits of the great chiefs, Rua nui and Nukutawhiti, who split the lands north and south of the Hokianga — Rua nui taking the south side and Nukutawhiti the lands to the north — and of poor More, a chief who fought with Hone Heke over a whale and was killed on the rock that gives Mitimiti (meaning lick lick) its unusual name. Great power, or mana as it's known to Maori, was thought to come from feasting upon a chief's brains.

Like everywhere in New Zealand every place name has a story behind it. The Moetangi Stream (wailing at night) got its name after the Europeans arrived, when the cries of homesick Maori were borne down the valley on an easterly wind. Suffering from European illnesses, they had been banished to the honeycomb caves on Mt Ototope to eat, sleep, and die.

Tipu even has tales of the Waitaha, the people found living near Mitimiti when his own ancestors arrived. Legend says they had a temple in the hills, and that they arrived on the back of a great bird.

In more recent times, flax mills lined the coast, and the graves of Chinese flax workers, hidden amongst the dunes, bear witness to their hard lives. The Maori once buried their own in the dunes too, until Atama Paparangi, the first Catholicised chief in New Zealand, ordered their bones exhumed and placed in the Maungahione Cemetery in Mitimiti. Sitting atop a hill, this beautiful graveyard commands a prime position in the village, and affords excellent views of the marae, Hato Hemi (St James) Church, and the raw beauty of the coastline.

Built in 1916 using kauri from the Warawara Forest, Hato Hemi Church is well worth a look for it has a breathtaking wood-panelled interior. Taonga (treasures) include an historic whalebone mere that has its own tale to tell. Found in the Waikato by a soldier during the Land Wars, it was carried back to England, but its possessor suffered a series of unfortunate events, so returned it to Mitimiti on the instruction of a clairvoyant. Originally green, the mere turned white on arrival in Mitimiti — or so the story goes.

Refreshed from our stay and ready to explore the coast further north, we reluctantly depart, our journey taking us past several stray cows on the way, and a happy bunch of kids on horses, who are hoofing it down the main street of Panguru.

Our next stop is Kohukohu, once a busy port for kauri spars and timber. In the early 1900s, it was a thriving timber town with around 5,000 men employed at the mill and sailing ships lined up at the wharf. Today, the boats are long gone, and fire has destroyed many of the town's finest buildings, but there are still some interesting attractions to be found here, such as the oldest stone bridge in New Zealand, and a cannon from the sailing ship the Boyd.

The local art on display at the Village Arts Gallery, a creative co-op set up by five enterprising artists, is well worth seeing, and after exploring the village, we drive on through lush countryside, passing rolling farms and long kikuyu grass, via Broadwood, where locals congregate outside the Four Square store to catch up on the news. Then it's on to Ahipara, where architecturally designed houses and salty old baches mingle companionably in a jumbled seaside manner, covering the landscape like barnacles.

First off we check into our accommodation for the night, an upstairs room at Ahipara Beachfront Accommodation that overlooks the dunes and beach, before heading to Shipwreck Bay to explore. Here we meet Mark Shanks of Good Vibrations, and we stop to watch for a time as he gives surfing lessons to a troop of young teens. He's surfed at Ahipara since 1973 and he reckons you can learn the basics — standing and riding on a wave — by the end of a single lesson.

Instead we choose to join a Tuatua Tours quad-bike adventure tour for a ride around the rocks, and splash through rock pools and play chicken with the tide, then put our skills to the test on the enormous dunes. Near Tauroa Point we pass an intriguing cluster of salt-encrusted dwellings: there's no running water, no power — and no SKY TV. These are shanties used by seaweed gatherers who come here to pick agar, which they then sell on to a buyer in Ahipara. It's a life far removed from most, yet its simplicity has its attractions. We stroll along the beach, broken paua, kina, and a rare native cowrie shell crunching underfoot.

Ahead, the long, slender curve of Ninety Mile Beach stretches before us, disappearing into a mysterious haze of salt. Another seemingly endless beach highway waiting to be explored...



Tipo at Mitimiti Beach House

My favourite places to stay

Ahipara Bay Motel

22 Reef View Road, Ahipara

09 409 4888

www.ahiparabaymotel.co.nz

Mitimiti Beach House

3881 West Coast Road, Mitimiti

09 409 5347

www.beach-house.co.nz

Ahipara Beachfront Accommodation

14 Kotare Street, Ahipara

09 409 4007

www.beachfront.net.nz

My favourite places to eat

Bayview Restaurant & Bar

22 Reef View Road, Ahipara
09 409 4888

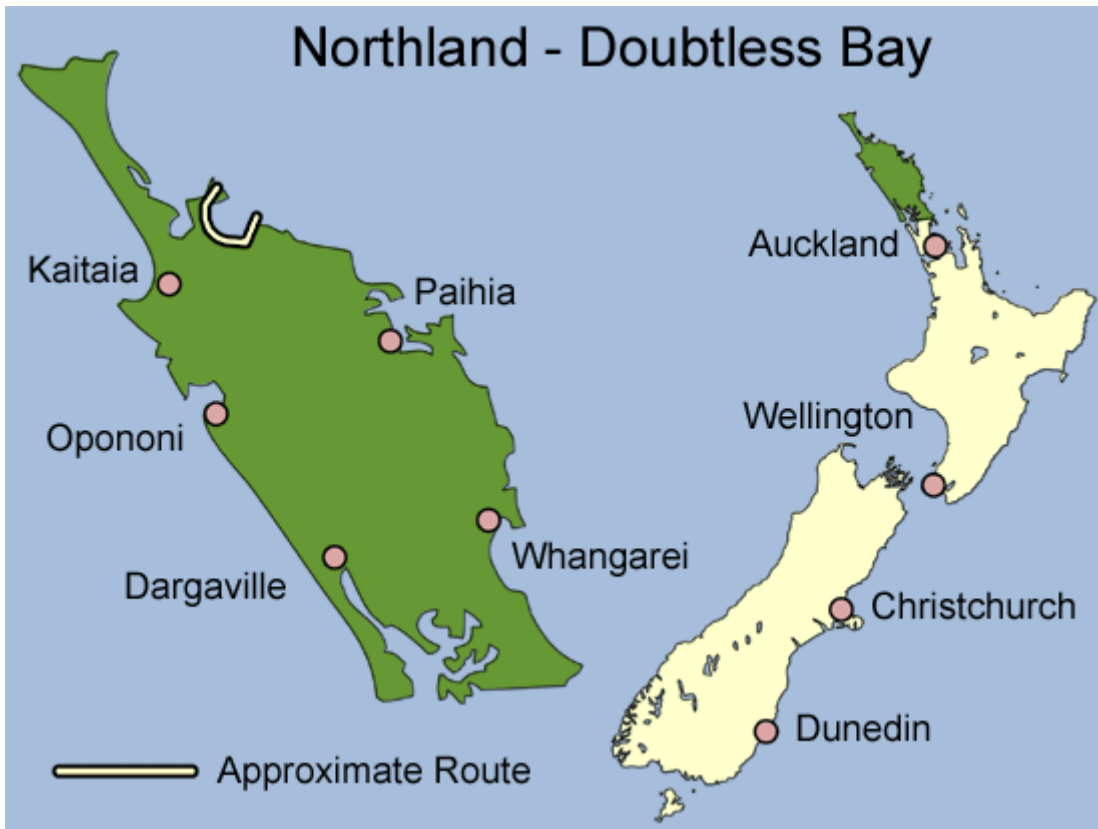
Beachcomber Restaurant

222 Commerce Street, Kaitiaki
09 408 2010



Quad biking to Tauroa Point

4. Doubtless Bay



Mangonui Harbour from Rangikapiti Pa

Mmmm-mmm, Mangonui macadamia nuts. They're tantalisingly smooth, with the faintest hint of coconut, and a buttery aftertaste that lingers long after the last morsel has gone. Where to find them? At Lindo and Laetitia Ferguson's place on Butler Point, Hihi Beach, Doubtless Bay.

The pair planted some 400 trees of the Queensland variety about 30 years ago.

Here in winterless Northland, the nuts are picked mid-year and Laetitia says that the picking is extremely labour-intensive.

"And then there's the husking. The outer layer has to be removed within 24 hours so they can begin to dry," she says.

The nuts are next placed in onion-bags to dry slowly over a period of two weeks or so before they are heated in a silo (which can hold up to 800kg) and vacuum-packed.

"Drying them properly is a key step in the processing," says Laetitia, for while a raw macadamia nut has a lovely flavour, similar to fresh coconut, if they're not properly dried, they don't preserve well.

At Butler Point, these nuts are added to everything, from soups and salads through to pasta dishes; they're even used to coat fresh fish fillets from the harbour. Laetitia makes macadamia-nut butters with both roasted and plain nuts, which taste heavenly on hot toast or crackers, or added to Asian-influenced cooking. Macadamia pesto is also a highlight, made with generous quantities of garlic and basil. And of course, everyone's favourite, chocolate-coated macadamias, are available in their small shop as well.

Macadamia nuts are not the only reason visitors come to Lindo and Laetitia's property. Encompassing the whole of Butler Point, a peninsula reaching into the Mangonui Harbour, it features park-like surroundings, a pa site (fortress), and a large grove of mature pohutukawa trees — perfect for picnicking under during the summer. But it wasn't always this way. When Lindo stumbled across the property some 40 years ago on a fishing expedition with a friend, there was no road in and no electric power, and the old Butler homestead was in disrepair.

"Where the macadamia nut trees now grow it was a jungle; the sheep kept the grass down. I had to really persuade Laetitia to come and have a look," says Lindo.

But when she saw it, she couldn't miss the potential. They constructed their own home, then restored the original 1830s homestead, which was originally built by the Anglican Church and barged to Butler Point from Paewhenua Island Mission Station.

They also set about rediscovering the history of the place. Mangonui was once a whaling base, a provisioning R&R port used by US whale boats, some of which moored here rather than in the infamous Bay of Islands, known in those days as the 'hellhole' of the Pacific.

"There were 30 or more whale boats here at a time," says Lindo. "So many they moored side by side across the harbour, and you could walk over them all the way from Butler Point to Mangonui."

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Further Reading

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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>