



OTOROHANGA

New Zealand's Kiwiana capital

Laurel Watson visits one of our amazing places.

Considering that Otorohanga is only a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Auckland, I can't believe it's taken me 44 years to get there!

In fact, the last time I was in the King Country I was about seven years old and only got as far as Waitomo's glow-worm caves.

As you can imagine, times have moved on, but what is so wonderful is that many of the best bits of small-town New Zealand remain in Otorohanga, the Kiwiana capital of the world! Often called 'Oto' by locals, this is a friendly, easy-going farming community and a perfect example of the great Kiwi one-street town, which in this case is decorated with murals and displays of all things Kiwiana.

We came in search of a weekend away with the family and our first port of call was the Otorohanga Kiwi House & Native Bird Park, which is New Zealand's original kiwi house.

Having been to kiwi displays that were like spotting a needle in a very dark haystack, I had been told this was the best place for the kids to get a really good look at kiwis.

There are two kiwis on display at any given time.

The area they are in is lit to emulate night with a full moon, so we had a fantastic look at both a large spotted female kiwi and a smaller brown kiwi. The Kiwi House operates an active breeding programme dedicated to the conservation of our iconic native bird, and you can even adopt your own kiwi (or a number of native birds, even a tuatara or two).

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After enjoying watching the kiwis' very funny antics (trust me, it's hard to tear yourself away), we walked through the landscaped park which is packed with gorgeous native birds (such as ourselves, although some of the ducks were very bossy, which certainly doesn't reflect the Kiwi female).

You can see the ever-playful kea and kaka, an aviary stocked with big and beautiful wood pigeons and other native birds, a great new enclosure for the falcons, which was recently opened by Prime Minister John Key, and a really cool native reptile display, which reminded me of the benefits of moisturiser.

After buying up very cute Kiwiana merchandise from the gift shop (great tea towels), we made our way into town.

The main street is lined with hanging baskets full of flowers and iconic symbols of Kiwiana, lending a fantastic small-town holiday feel to the town.

The Kiwiana Walk in the centre of town is a must-see. Dedicated to Sir Edmund Hillary, there's everything from pavlova, No 8 wire, the All Blacks, sheep, Team NZ, Aunt Daisy, school milk, the kiwi, Sir Ed Hillary (of course) and Bruce McLaren. All the very best of the Kiwi spirit can be enjoyed by international travellers, and it is also a wonderful blast from the past for New Zealanders.

Visit the information centre for the inside info on what to do in the district (and the best buy, the Otorohanga Kiwiana stamps), including the best free stuff to do with your family. For example, you can check out the Marokopa Falls, the Mangapohue Natural Bridge (the stunning remnants of a collapsed cave) and the Piripiri Cave, find fossilised shellfish at Kiritehere Beach, walk along the stunning black sand at Ocean Beach or partake in the ever-popular pastime of jumping off the pier in Kawhia. So much to do, so little time.

As we wandered down the main street, we came upon Haddad's Menswear. Don't leave town without calling in to this store – it's a fantastic show of retail savvy (circa 1965). I doubt you'll leave without an iconic piece of clothing – think Swanndri, Wrangler, Canterbury, Skellerup, Manawatu work jerseys, Waikato rugby shirts and Norsewear socks, and you must have a Haddad-brothers-designed, felt stockman's hat (yes, we do own one now – very useful for downtown Auckland).

By this time we were getting hungry and although there seemed to be plenty of delicious bakery smells wafting our way, we were drawn to The Thirsty Weta, bang smack in the centre of town.

The cool-yet-friendly look of the place (tractor seats for the outside dining area and corrugated iron mixed with great big slabs of polished wood inside) is a perfect fit for Otorohanga.

Troy, who owns the place, left Auckland for “a more Kiwi lifestyle” for his family, and now knows more about showing lambs at the A&P Show than he ever thought he would. He and his friendly staff are providing the community with great big delicious breakfasts, lunches and dinners. It is also a great place to party, with a courtesy car provided to get you home. I think many an Otorohanga occasion is celebrated in this great cafe and bar.

There is also plenty of great accommodation in the region but we decided to treat ourselves to Kamahi Cottage, the only five-star farm stay in New Zealand, and what is more wonderful is that it accepts children! Don't get me wrong, this is the perfect getaway for a romantic moment for two (must try it sometime) but if you would like to indulge yourself and take the kids along too, this is the place. Now this may sound a little scary for a family like mine with a 10-year-old and a very active seven-year-old, but our hosts, Liz and Evan Cowen, won the children over in a nanosecond.

The cottage is completely self-contained, offering all the lovely accoutrement that five stars suggest, with the added bonus of an amazing rural setting on the 450-hectare sheep and beef farm. I woke up to my seven-year-old exclaiming, “Mum! Look how beautiful it is outside. We even have our own sheep!” This is a little touch of Kiwi paradise and we found we were welcomed and made to feel relaxed the moment we arrived.

Liz is a great cook and will whip up a romantic dinner if requested. The amazing breakfast we enjoyed was not only delicious, but great for giving us the energy we needed for the black-water rafting (for Mark) and bush walking (for me and the kids). Liz even gave my son a piece of lemon tart to take with him for morning tea after learning it was his favourite treat (she has kindly shared this with us all – see the delicious Kamahi Lemon Silk Tart recipe which follows).

Unfortunately, we didn't get time to do the horse treks, the 4WD biking or farm show. We didn't get to the hot water beach at Te Puia Springs, or to the tiny town of Kawhia, which is famous for its Kawhai Kai festival. We didn't get to go fishing for trout or do all of the free stuff the information centre told us about, but we certainly filled our day in Otorohanga and are determined to come back to explore even further!

Meanwhile here are some great Kiwiana recipes to keep a little bit of Otorohanga in my kitchen...

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THE SIR EDMUND HILLARY WALKWAY



ABOVE:
THE THIRSTY WETA



RIGHT:
A YELLOW GECKO AT THE
OTOROHANGA KIWI HOUSE
& NATIVE BIRD PARK





KAMAHI LEMON SILK TART

2 sheets pre-rolled sweet short pastry, thawed
 finely grated zest of 1 lemon
 juice of 3 lemons
 3 eggs
 ½ cup sugar
 ½ cup sour cream

Preheat the oven to 180°C.
 Line a round 25cm pie or flan dish with baking paper.
 Line the dish with the pastry sheets and trim to fit.
 Prick well and bake blind until just cooked but not yet brown.
 Reduce oven heat to 170°C.
 Beat together the remaining ingredients.
 Pour into the pre-baked pie shell and bake until set and golden (approx 15–20 minutes).
 Serve with freshly whipped cream and slices of kiwifruit, strawberries or your favourite fruit. (For a lighter accompaniment beat together 1 cup lemon-flavoured yoghurt with ½ cup fresh cream till thick.)
 Serves 4–6.

FAIL-PROOF PAVLOVA

6 x 60g egg whites, at room temperature
 pinch cream of tartar
 2 cups caster sugar
 2 tsp white vinegar
 1 tsp vanilla essence
 1 Tbsp cornflour

Preheat the oven to 150°C (130°C if fan-forced). Cut a sheet of non-stick baking paper 26cm square, draw a 23cm circle onto the baking paper and place it onto a greased baking tray, drawn side down.
 Whisk the egg whites and cream of tartar in a clean, dry bowl using an electric mixer for 3–4 minutes or until soft peaks form. Add the caster sugar one spoon at a time, whisking well after each addition until meringue is thick and glossy (about 10 minutes).
 Add the vinegar, vanilla and sifted cornflour, and gently fold through using a spatula. Spread a layer of meringue onto

your circle that is approximately 3cm thick, then pipe or spoon the remaining meringue around the edges of your circle to form a shallow bowl.
 Bake for 1 hour or until crisp. Turn the oven off and allow the meringue to cool in the oven 1–2 hours (or overnight) with the door slightly open.
 Slide meringue off the baking paper onto a serving plate and serve with whipped cream and fruit – such as strawberries, passionfruit, banana and kiwifruit.
 Serves 6.

CHES & DALE MACARONI CHEESE

1 cup elbow macaroni, uncooked
 ⅓ cup chopped onion
 1 Tbsp butter
 1 Tbsp flour
 salt and pepper
 ¼ cups milk
 250g processed cheese (such as Chesdale cheese), cubed
 1 medium ripe tomato, sliced (optional)

Cook macaroni according to package directions and then drain, keeping a little of the cooking water in the macaroni to stop it sticking.
 Meanwhile, gently cook the onions in butter in a medium saucepan, but do not brown.
 Stir in flour and add the milk slowly, whisking all the time. Cook and continue to whisk until thick and bubbly. Add the cheese and stir until melted. Add macaroni to a one-litre casserole dish and stir in cheese sauce until well blended.
 Bake uncovered in a 180°C oven for 25 minutes, then add tomato slices to top and cook for 5 minutes more. Let stand 10 minutes before serving.
 Serves 2. ■

HELPFUL WEBSITES TO PLAN YOUR TRIP:

www.kiwihouse.org.nz
www.theweta.co.nz
www.kamaha.co.nz
www.waitomo.org.nz

