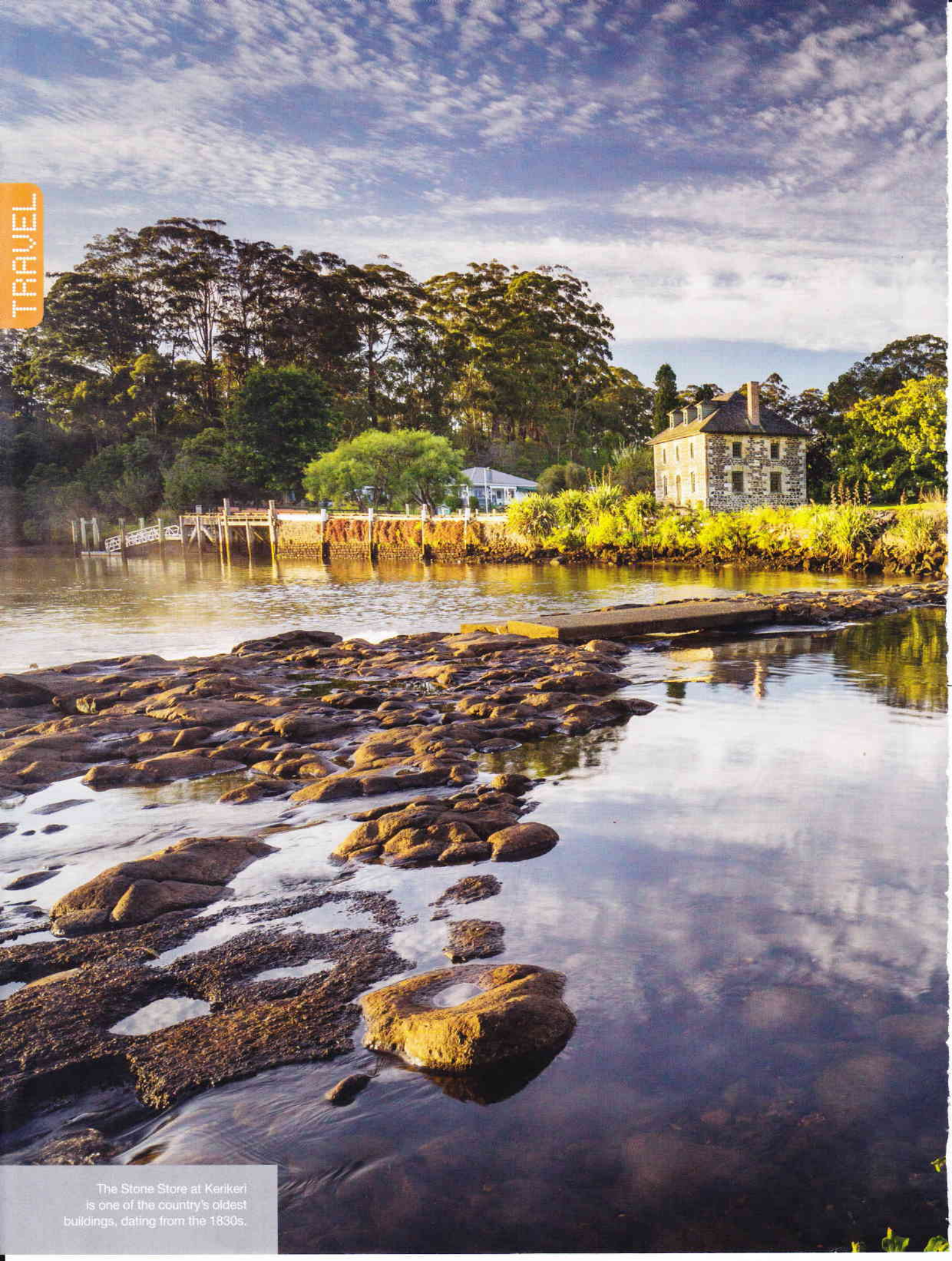
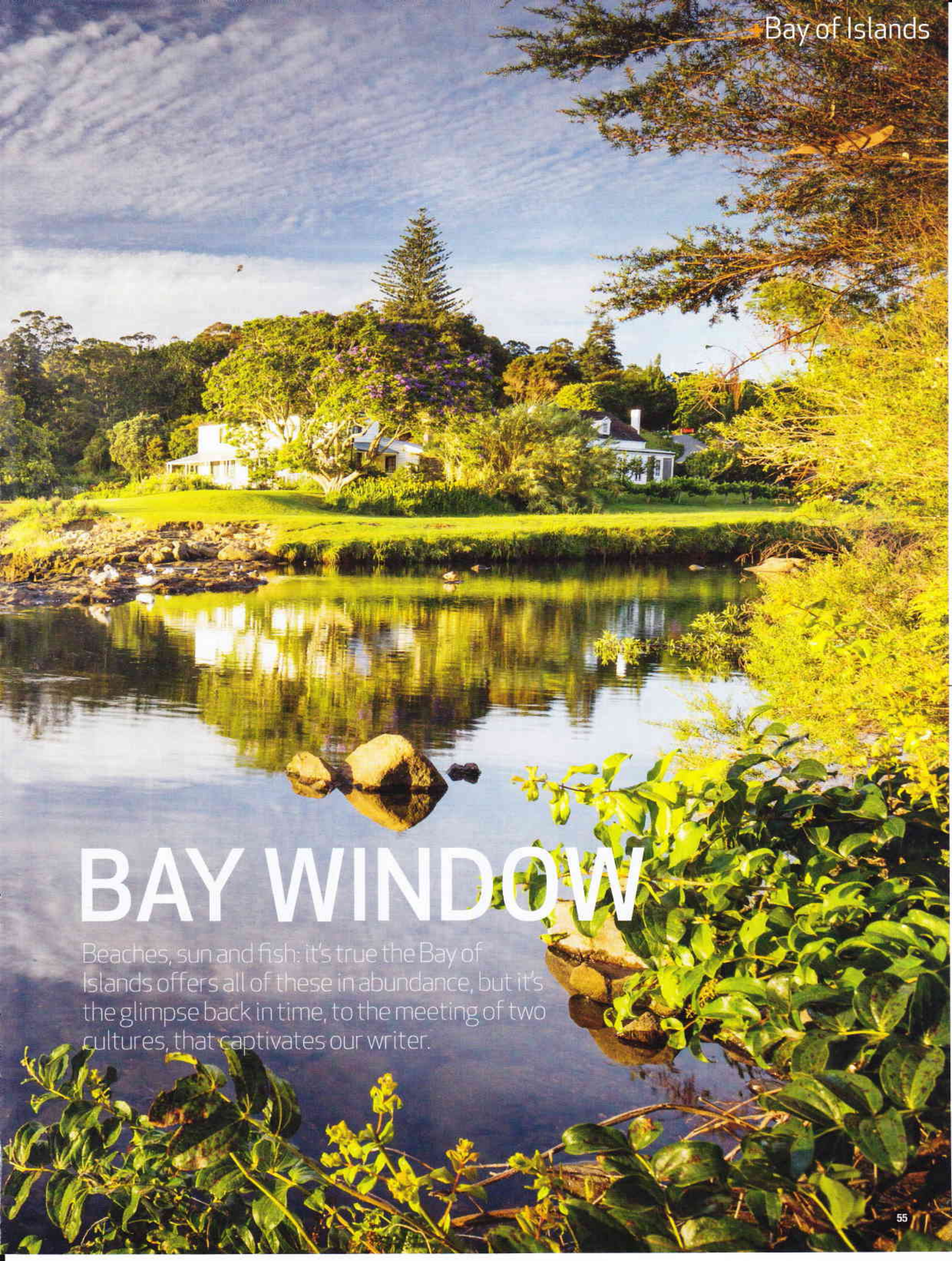


The Stone Store at Kerikeri is one of the country's oldest buildings, dating from the 1830s.

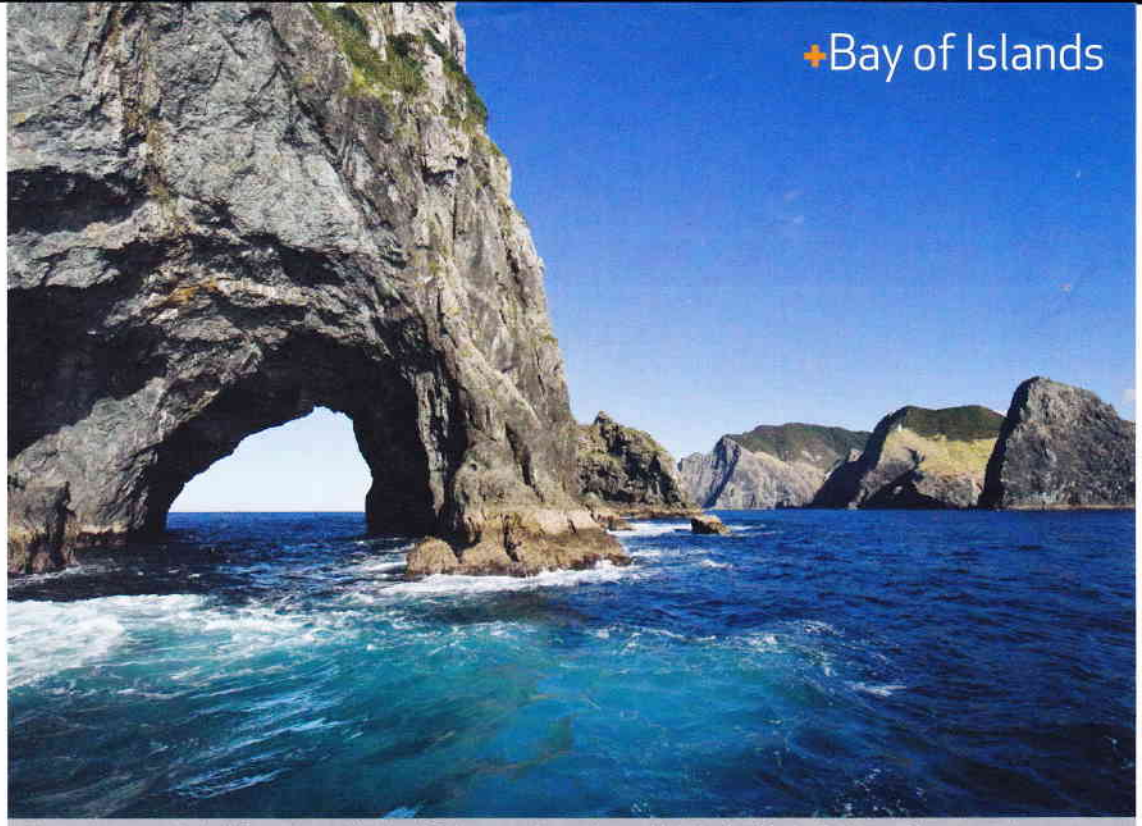


BAY WINDOW

Beaches, sun and fish: it's true the Bay of Islands offers all of these in abundance, but it's the glimpse back in time, to the meeting of two cultures, that captivates our writer.

DO The **Twin Coast Cycle Trail/ Pou Herenga Tai** takes you into the heart of history. On the Okaihau-to-Horeke leg, the latter part of which was still under construction at press time, you pass St Catherine's Church, site of a memorial to 12 British soldiers who died in the first battle of the Northern Wars, then through stands of native bush into the picturesque Utakura Valley. A short ride past Horeke, on the Hokianga, is the Wesleyan's Mangungu Mission station, where the largest signing of the Treaty took place in front of a crowd of 3000. See the excellent Top Trail (toptrail.co.nz) for hire and tour details.

Fullers GreatSights offers a range of tours and cruises in the Bay of Islands, including the Dolphin Eco Experience, in which you can swim with dolphins, and the Cream Trip, which includes island visits. dolphincruises.co.nz



Opposite page: Puketi Forest near Kerikeri. This page, from above: Hole in the Rock; Te Whare Runanga at Waitangi; a Salt Air helicopter approaches Motu Kokako; historic Horeke Church.

There was a rainbow anchored off Rangihoua, in the Bay of Islands, a small miracle at a site where miracles were historically in short supply. This was the literal beachhead of Christianity in Aotearoa, the shoreline where Samuel Marsden first preached the gospel, on Christmas Day, 1814, and where European settlement of New Zealand was founded in the form of the Church Missionary Society's pioneering Rangihoua mission station. Marsden's missionaries brought "glad tidings of great joy", but these were not happy campers.

At the entrance to the Rangihoua Heritage Park, a path funnels you initially into architect Pip Cheshire's new building, a clay-walled shelter with a dramatic wing-like roof perched above the valley leading to the beach. Named Rore Kahu, it began life as a church project with a brief to create a "chapel at the top of the hill", but evolved to include greater reference to the Maori side of this early encounter. On a wet late-afternoon in winter, with no one around, it's a powerful scene-setter for the historic site below.

Rangihoua was a test of faith. The missionaries were allowed a castaway's purchase on an unpromising site in the shadow of a hilltop pa, their presence entirely at the sufferance of Maori. Forbidden from making private trade, they were at times on starvation rations, desperate for the next supply ship, yet also a target for plunder by parties unaligned to Rangihoua or to their ultimate protector, the Ngapuhi chief Hongi Hika.

There were personality clashes, possibly an adulterous affair, at least one outbreak of internal violence when a gun was discharged. And it would be 12 years before the first Maori was baptised.

What you take away from Rangihoua is a sense of the precariousness of early European settlement in New Zealand, and of the drama in these moments of first contact. And that's true more generally of the Bay of Islands. This really is the cradle of the nation. By all means go diving or catch a fish, but no visit to this part of New Zealand should neglect the rich history or Maori culture.

It can be dramatic. From the Salt Air base at Paihia (**saltair.co.nz**), I took a memorable helicopter flight to Motu Kokako, an island off Cape Brett better known as the "Hole in the Rock", which rises dramatically from the cobalt-blue ocean, a ring of white waves at the foot of its sheer cliffs. Previously visitors could only visit by boat, but for the past couple of years Salt Air and the Motu Kokako Ahu Whenua Trust, which administers the Maori-owned island, have been running flights to a platform nested at the top, accompanied by iwi guides.

The venture has been controversial, says trustee Bob Clarke, who we picked up en route to the island from Te Rawhiti Marae, along with his wife Louise and cousin Natasha. There are still some whanau who disagree with bringing people to this sacred

This page, from above: The Treaty House at Waitangi; the front of Ngatokimatawhaorua Waka on the Treaty Grounds; the full waka; a Pacific gecko on Motu Kokako. Opposite page: Cape Brett Lighthouse.

site. The counter-argument is that the trust has kaitiaki obligations and the flights allow it to fund its work, including twice-yearly biodiversity studies.

Whatever the background, it's an eye-opening experience, beginning with a powhiri from our hosts, followed by a guided walk through bush that flows from the summit to the seaward cliffs. There are two lizard species on Motu Kokako, described as "probably the most important" island in the Bay for conservation values. As we explore the bush litter for signs of geckos, Clarke tells stories.

Once, he says, Motu Kokako performed an important role as a rite of passage. Boys would have to scale the cliffs, then bush-bash to the top, returning with a kokako feather to prove they'd made it. Another tradition held that waka taua heading to war would first be paddled through the hole in the island. If a warrior was hit by a drip from the ceiling it was a bad omen, and he would be put off the canoe.

But it's the marriage story Clarke likes best. There was a tradition of marriages arranged for political reasons, he explains. If a couple didn't like the look of each other, they'd be left with a week's supplies on Motu Kokako, the exercise repeated until they were happy – or resigned – to be wed.

"You know how Russell in its day was known as the 'Hell-Hole of the Pacific?'. Well I want to see this island known as the 'Love Rock of the Pacific'," says Clarke, who envisages guests eventually being able to stay overnight.

From a marriage island, to one of the key "touchpoints" of early contact between Maori and Pakeha. The Kororipo-Kerikeri Basin is where the CMS founded its second mission, site of two of our oldest surviving buildings, the Mission House (otherwise known as Kemp House, 1822) and the 1832 Stone Store. Unlike at Rangihoua, they were built to last.

"The Stone Store in particular was a very potent symbol of their faith," says Liz Bigwood, who manages the site for Heritage New Zealand. "They're no longer putting up these little wooden flimflam buildings. This said, 'We're here.'"

Even so, the mission was built on shifting ground. As at Rangihoua, it lay under the watchful eye of Maori – Kororipo was Hongi Hika and Rewa's seaport pa, where they fished and kept waka. The missionaries were invited to settle there because Maori could see material benefits, and the realities of that arrangement could be confronting.

Bigwood describes an incident where Ngapuhi captives were slaughtered in front of CMS personnel. "They came out thinking it was going to be Shangri-La, but it wasn't; they were dealing with a warrior people, and it was often a struggle."

She's fascinated by these stories, and of the efforts of the missionaries to get to grips with what they were experiencing. "My husband is indigenous Fijian, and I've lived in a Fijian village; you go into a culture and you have to untangle it, thread by thread."

DO Descending from a long line of healers, Rawi Pere was fortunate to have a grandmother who nurtured her gifts, including a traditional holistic Maori form of massage known as miri miri. Based at the **Nga Ringa Wairua** healing centre in downtown Kerikeri, Rawi and husband Ngawati combine to provide a two-person miri miri which begins with a karakia and includes traditional herbal preparations. facebook.com/ngaringawairuahandsofspirit

The Waitangi Mountain Bike Park is a community-driven project in the heart of the Waitangi Endowment Forest. At time of publication, the first section of what is intended to be a world-class park was expected to be opened this season, with more than 20km of trails already developed by Southstar Trails and bike hire and other facilities planned. See focuspaihia.org.nz for more information.

From above: The Bay of Islands Marina at Opua; a detail from the Museum of Waitangi; a viewing room in the same museum; Marsden Cross Historic Reserve.

+Bay of Islands

EAT **Charlotte's Kitchen** is a relatively new eatery located at the end of Paihia wharf, with killer views of the bay. The bistro-style food is excellent, with scope for shared meals. The service is friendly and the location can't be beaten. charlotteskitchen.co.nz

STAY As the tagline says, the **Duke of Marlborough** in Russell has been "refreshing rascals and reprobates since 1827". Lovingly restored, the waterfront beauty offers a range of accommodation, including premium rooms with harbour views, and terrific food in a dining-room setting, all roaring fires and chandeliers. theduke.co.nz

Moon Gate Villa is the B&B accommodation of choice in Kerikeri. Set within a lovely subtropical garden, the villa offers three large and comfortable suites with private outdoor spaces, and delicious continental and cooked breakfasts. moongatevilla.com

The internal politics are equally intriguing. From his Sydney base, Marsden was routinely at loggerheads with the mission's Superintendent John Butler, who in turn was offside with Thomas Kendall and others. Butler would eventually be accused of public drunkenness and put on a boat home, and Kendall dismissed from the Society for, among other "crimes", defending the gun trade as a necessity for getting on with Maori.

"I've been watching reruns of *The Sopranos* and thinking, 'It's so like this!'" says Bigwood. "The positional plays, the fluid situation."

In 1840, the world changed. At the Waitangi treaty grounds, the new Te Kongahu Museum of Waitangi (**waitangi.org.nz**) does a fine job of illuminating that moment of transformation, and its contested aftermath. Among the exhibits are several precious items, taonga previously scattered around the country in private and public collections.

Curatorial assistant Caitlin Trimmer-Arends pointed out highlights, such as the throwing weapon that was carved from a whale's jaw for the second Maori King Tawhiao, and a bust that Hone Heke carved of himself while on a ship from Sydney.

We walked into a room dominated by a six-by-nine-foot portrait of Queen Victoria. One of Trimmer-Arends's favourite exhibits, it arrived on the *Britannia* in 1974 intended for Waitangi, but ended up at Government House. "It was supposed to go up in the Treaty House but was far too big. This is the first time we've been able to display it here."

Nearby is Hobson's proclamation of Victoria's sovereignty over New Zealand. ("This document shows what a country's formal takeover looks like on paper," reads the interpretation.) And in another room, the great carved pou whenua that accompanied the 1975 land march to Parliament. The latter was loaned with a stipulation: it's not allowed to touch the ground until the final treaty claim is settled.

As curatorial assistant, Trimmer-Arends donned the white gloves to catalogue these and other taonga. "It's been incredible," she says. "You just don't get to touch history like you do here."

She might be speaking of the Bay of Islands.

STORY **MATT PHILP**

contact northlandnz.com

Photographs **One Shot, Alamy**