



COAST | AUCKLAND

Kiwi noir

If Bondi Beach is Barbie, New Zealand's Piha Beach is Heathcliff. Brooding, wild, unpredictable.

Don't turn up here with your fluro rashie, tiny bikini or striped cabana. A black T-shirt is what you need, or a long coat so you can hunch your back against the wind that slams the raging Tasman Sea onto jagged rocks.

While surfers love it year round and families flock to it in summer, Piha Beach, 50 minutes west of Auckland at the edge of the Waitakere Ranges, is more likely to be found on an indie album cover than in a jaunty sunscreen ad, such is its coolness both in the water (winter temperatures are a wetsuit-wanting 14C) and out of it (Neil Finn has a "bach" here and is known to brave the surf with fellow muso Eddie Vedder).

Make no mistake, this beach has attitude. Perhaps it's the black sand. Run a magnet along it and your hand will transform into a cone of dark fairy-floss thanks to the high iron content. On sun-baked days, this same sand-noir can singe any feet foolhardy enough to be bare.

Or maybe it's Lion Rock (Te Piha), the crouching king-of-the-jungle monolith which is actually the eroded neck of a volcano that looms over and divides Piha and North Piha beaches. Stairs will take you up this beast, which is decorated with Maori carvings and tributes to fallen Anzacs, but not to its summit, which is closed for safety reasons.

Piha Beach and its arty namesake town, which tumbles down a hill towards the black sand, is the dramatic finale to an afternoon adventure with Bush and Beach Wilderness Experience Nature Tours.

Earlier, our group gets to know each other as our small bus journeys through



Forget the jaunty cabana, Heathcliff would be right at home on this broody, beautiful black-sand beach. By Jane Richards

Auckland's suburbs and out to the wild west of the Waitakere Ranges National Park with its rainforest, winding cliffs and rugged coastline. (A Texan couple is shocked at the high price of local "gas" and take innumerable pictures of bowsers along the way, while the Australians stay quiet when introduced to the authentic *Kiwi* meat pie.)

Mid-way we stop for panoramic views of Auckland's two harbours at the Arataki Visitors Centre which also offers Maori carvings, a replica of the extinct, towering moa bird which once stamped around the area, and a walking trail through the rainforest, which we tackle with our expert guide and driver, Chris.

As we pick our way past giant tree ferns, we learn how New Zealand's famed silver fern can be used if you need to retrace your steps at night (leave a trail of fronds behind you, *a la* Hansel and Gretel, with the undersides face-up - they shine under moonlight) and how the kawakawa plant can be used topically to relieve eczema or brewed to aid digestion - and if that does the job, its large, heart-shaped leaves have been dubbed the Kiwi camper's toilet paper.

We're also stopped in our tracks by the sheer enormity of the odd, ancient kauri tree. These giants almost went the way of

the moa bird after being used for sail masts in centuries past. Now they're part of a slow-growing but good-news story. Much of this protected forest was once cleared for pasture. It's now been left to regenerate, something it's been doing with gusto, albeit under careful management.

But back to Piha Beach. It's overcast, and treacherous white-tops are delivering a belting as the wind propels us along the shore. Underfoot, tiny coiled white shells, *Spirula spirula* (a one-time home to the Ram's horn squid) appear to glow on this dark sand that screams intrigue to anyone used to golden beaches. I stare at bits of bleached driftwood, blobs of translucent jellyfish. A dinosaur bone? A deep-sea treasure? And then another thought emerges: piano keys. Turns out the haunting Jane Campion image of a lonely piano stranded on black sand was filmed just around the corner at Karekare Beach.

As we drift towards our minibus for tea and Anzac biscuits (no disputing the shared ownership here), we turn again to the shore as the sun sinks, casting a sliver of silver on the waves, and revealing something Aucklanders know. Mysterious, wild, often treacherous. Piha beach is all of that and something else - startlingly beautiful. **T**



THE DETAILS

TOUR

Bush and Beach Wilderness Experience Nature Tour from Auckland, \$NZ200 (\$173). See bushandbeach.co.nz

STAY

Cordis Hotel, Auckland. 83 Symonds Street. From \$NZ250 (\$219) a night. See cordishotels.com
SO/Auckland 35 Hobson Street. From \$NZ319 (\$280). See so-hotels.com
Abstract Hotel. 8 Upper Queen Street, Auckland. From \$130 (\$114). See abstracthotel.co.nz

The writer was a guest of Bush and Beach and Discover Auckland. See aucklandnz.com/au

Piha Beach and Lion Rock; a raging Tasman Sea; exploring the black sand, and a carving at Arataki Visitors Centre. Photos:Alamy