

# Wild heart

Looking for untouched wilderness and rugged beauty? For the ultimate getaway move off the grid and head to Great Barrier Island

Words and photography Melissa Gardi

About 90 kilometres northeast of downtown Auckland lies an untouched paradise – a place where you're bound to find a beach to call your own. A place that embodies good ol' Kiwi hospitality in its truest form, where people take time to say hello to one another. A place where cellphone coverage is limited and where much of the island runs on solar power or generators. It doesn't matter – you don't come to Great Barrier Island to watch TV or hit the clubs. Here, fast food and malls aren't part of the itinerary, instead it's about experiencing a natural wonderland in all its glory.

Pack your walking shoes as Barrier is a playground ripe for exploring. With more than

20 trails covering 100 kilometres of native forest there's a track for every fitness level, and even the most basic affords incredible scenic views. One must-visit? The Kaitoke thermal pools that take an hour to reach on foot. Another to explore is the 30-minute Warren Track. After a gentle climb through a kauri plantation near Port Fitzroy, head towards Warrens Waterfall, cooling off at the swimming holes along the way. If you're up for the ultimate eco-adventure, take the three-hour ascent to Mt Hobson on the South Fork Track, where the panoramic views of the Hauraki Gulf are breathtaking.

Once you work up an appetite head to one of the local eateries, but beware of the varied opening hours. After a big day of being

a beach bum, treat yourself to one of the mouthwatering creations at the Burger Shack in Claris or head to Currach Irish Pub in Tryphena for some live music and a pint.

Besides the best coffee and carrot cake on the island, Hooked on Barrier ([hookedonbarrier.co.nz](http://hookedonbarrier.co.nz)) boasts some of the best water activities around: if catching a kingfish is at the top of your bucket list, book a half- or full-day fishing charter. The West Coast Sightseeing experience is an all-rounder, catering both to the keen fisherman and those who prefer to sit back and watch. Departing in the morning, the four-hour boat tour includes a barbecue lunch while you voyage past sublime bush-clad mountains, and through Broken

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Islands and Man O'War passage. You'll see nesting gannet colonies and glide through dolphin and whale territory – be ready to jump off the deck and join a pod for a swim.

One of the best things about Barrier is the variety of accommodation, particularly the baches, which you can rent year-round through [bookabach.co.nz](http://bookabach.co.nz) or [islandaccommodation.co.nz](http://islandaccommodation.co.nz). There are more than a dozen campgrounds, from the seaside splendour of Harotaonga Bay DOC Campground to the private, sheltered campsites and chalet at Kaitoke's Sugarloaf. As Barrier is possum-free, you'll find species that are rare on the mainland, such as brown teal ducks, Kaka parrots and little blue penguins.

If personal service, including meals and housekeeping, sounds more like you, book a room at Great Barrier Lodge ([greatbarrierlodge.co.nz](http://greatbarrierlodge.co.nz)). Set on the pristine Whangaparapara Harbour, each of the 11 rooms are decked out in native timber. At the front of the lodge sits a verandah where guests mingle as they relax into holiday mode: reading books, sipping a glass of wine, often transfixed by the idyllic views and abundant bird life. Suss out the enchanting coves and inlets on a kayak or paddleboard, or rent a mountain bike and zig-zag along the rugged coastlines.

You really can't experience anything better than the diversity of beaches on Barrier – there's no reason to stick to just one. From the wild northern tip of Whangapoua and Palmers Beach to the calm bays of Tryphena, you're bound to find your very own

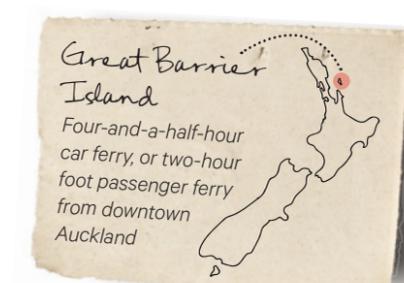
stretch of coastline – every day offers a new discovery, from snorkelling for paua off the intrepid rocky surrounds of Cape Barrier to playing a game of hide-and-seek in the tussock-covered dunes at Kaitoke.

Barrier's a siren call for surfers, with plenty of hotspots that beckon. Only a short walk over sandbanks from Okiwi Airfield, you'll reach world-class surfing mecca Okiwi Bar, iconic for its waves, big and small. If you're just finding your balance, sign up for a lesson at Aotea Surf School ([aoteasurfschool.com](http://aoteasurfschool.com)) in Medlands. Neighbouring community Claris is worth a visit as it's one of the Barrier's hubs. And if you want to get up to scruff with local knowledge, a gold coin donation gains you access to the Milk, Honey and Grain Museum.

Creativity thrives on the island, as you'll discover at the GBI Community Art Gallery. Paintings that depict the local rugged beauty are sold alongside sculptures, jewellery and locally produced goodies, from organic soap and beauty creams to chutney and honey. Great Barrier was the first place in New Zealand to cultivate honey, so it's safe to say locals have got it down to a fine art.

Carry on the arty vibe by following the Art Discovery Trail to Schooner Bay's Black Cow Gallery for woodworks, and Tryphena's Top of the Rock gallery to view photography. At Shoal Bay Pottery you'll be tempted to find space in your suitcase for a beloved treasure or two – your mind and heart will already be jammed full. **g**

*The best way to get to Great Barrier is via SeaLink, which offers a two-hour fast ferry, or four-and-a-half-hour car ferry; the latter being the better choice if you're planning on bringing plenty of gear. Both arrive at Tryphena, a charming enclave at the island's southern end.*



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