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Six not to miss in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand



Mission Estate is New Zealand's oldest winery, founded by French missionaries.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

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Call it tough love. Along the east coast of New Zealand's North Island, a fishhook-shaped body of land has been the recipient of Mother Nature's harsh brand of parenting.

But Hawke's Bay (hawkesbaynz.com/) is all the better for it.

She changed the course of a river leaving beds of gravel behind. The stony surface proved beneficial for growing grapes, though, forcing the vines to send down deep roots to seek nutrients that give the wine extra character.

She sent a 7.8 magnitude earthquake in 1931, but in the 40 seconds the earth shook, 8,500 acres of land rose from the bay. The fertile tract of land is known locally as "The Gift." The city of Napier was demolished by the quake, but residents rebuilt in the style of the day and it became "The Art Deco Capital of the World."

Mother Nature sent her blessing to Hawke's Bay, too, giving it a mild Mediterranean climate with many days of sunshine. Visitors find plenty to do in any season. Among those not to miss:

Wine

New Zealand's oldest wine region produces about 70 percent of the country's red wine. Of Hawke's Bay's 70 wineries, 40 offer tastings. Many of these wines can't be found outside New Zealand.

Mission Estate was established in 1851 by French missionaries and still uses the winemaking techniques they brought from Bordeaux. It's New Zealand's oldest winery. Wine lovers might ask for a sip of Tom McDonald red at Church Road Winery. It's named for the father of New Zealand's red wines as is the Tom McDonald Cellar, New Zealand's only wine museum. The time to visit Craggy Range Vineyards is before sunset to view rosy light on Te Mata Peak from a table on the patio. Elephant Hill Winery is best seen in broad daylight when the modern building mirrors the Pacific Ocean just across the road.

Art deco

Nearly all of Napier features the art deco style with 140 original art deco buildings as well as many in the 1930s Spanish mission style. Visitors can buy a brochure for a self-guided tour at the Art Deco Shop or take one of the guided walks given by the Art Deco Trust. The organization also offers hop-on, hop-off bus tours and vintage car tours for those who want to take a spin around town in a Packard. Buildings of particular note include the National Tobacco Co., a mixture of art deco and art nouveau, and the Dome with copper cupola and clock tower above a former office building converted into luxury apartments that can be booked for overnight stays.

During Art Deco Weekend in February, modern vehicles are banned on the main streets and festivalgoers dress in 1930s attire for parades, music and dancing.



The gannet colony on Cape Kidnappers is the largest mainland gannet colony in the world and the most accessible. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Cape Kidnappers

Members of the Maori tribe kidnapped Captain Cook's Tahitian cabin boy when the explorer landed off the cape in 1769. They thought he was one of their own and wanted him back. The lad escaped, but the memory of the incident stuck and gave the cape its name.

A sheep and cattle station operates on the cape overlooking Hawke's Bay, but its most famous animals are the 20,000 gannets that congregate here from October to April in squawking 100-bird masses of nesting pairs. The largest mainland colony of these rare birds also is the most accessible with Gannet Safaris taking visitors within a few feet of the white birds for a close view of their black eye markings and toasted marshmallow crowns.

For visitors who prefer fairways to feathers, the Cape Kidnappers Golf Course perches on top of the cape with ocean waves crashing on rocks far below. Designed by Tom Doak, it ranks among the top golf courses in the world. It's one of the amenities of the five-star resort, The Farm at Cape Kidnappers.



New Zealand's lamb dishes are famous, especially the short loin at Black Barn Bistro. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Food

Hawke's Bay grows an abundance of stone fruits, olives and vegetables. They're on display in the Hawke's Bay Farmers Market, New Zealand's oldest farmers market where vendors also sell baked goods, a variety of mustards, giant crayfish and mugs of craft beer. The Kiwis come for breakfast and stay through the morning gathering around tables on the grass to socialize with visitors and listen to music from a live band.

Restaurants in the wineries are known for fine cuisine. Black Barn Vineyards serves lunch in its bistro and at tables in its courtyard. Terroir, the French country fine-dining restaurant at Craggy Range, sources Hawke's Bay's best produce, seafood and meats, especially First Light Foods' venison and grass-fed wagyu beef.



Watch out for frisky cows on the bike paths. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Biking

The Hawke's Bay region has more than 110 miles of bike paths. Takaro Trails Cycle Tours sells self-guided day tours that include bike, helmet and transfers. Some itineraries follow along the coast, others along river tracks where bikers can stop at wineries for tastings.

Maori experience

Rubbing noses is the traditional Maori greeting visitors receive as they are welcomed to a sacred Maori site during a visit organized by Waimarama Maori Tours. On the tour, visitors can learn about New Zealand's first people who arrived from Polynesia around the 14th century, practice a few words of Maori songs, listen to music played on traditional flutes, and watch warriors do battle with sticks and clubs. A feast of Maori dishes made from local seafood and produce might include sea urchin, eel, paua (abalone), fry bread and a delicious pavlova made of meringue, kiwi and whipped cream.

• Information for this article was gathered during a writers' conference sponsored by Tourism New Zealand.

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