

OAR CORPS
Tourists kayak to
Cathedral Cove.



**THE
HIGHLIGHT**
New Zealand

Paddle tale

The breath of the Maori pushes you along while kayaking the spectacular Mercury Bay off the Coromandel Peninsula.
By **Katherine Rodeghier**

“Raft up.” Hayden Gray, our Kiwi guide, waits while our group’s ten tandem kayaks paddle into position, side by side. I grab kayaks on each side of me and listen up.

Gray points a paddle toward the craggy coastline, the rocky outcroppings and the tree-studded islands scattered in Mercury Bay. “Erosion,” he says. The Coromandel Peninsula, a 60-mile-long ridge of subtropical jungle two hours from Auckland, is volcanic with coastline sculpted by wind and waves sweeping across the South Pacific. Cathedral Cove, where we’re headed, is one of the most photographed spots in New Zealand. I tuck my Nikon in a dry bag strapped to my kayak and hope I don’t tip.

Gray, who reminds me of Ashton Kutcher, runs through the signals to guide us to shore. Arms up, beckoning like a ramp rat guiding a 747 at O’Hare, means go for it: ride the surf right up on the sand. Arms flailing like a drowning man means paddle the hell backward and wait for a better wave. It’s arms up. I slide onto the beach like Cleopatra cruising the Nile and hop out. Some strip down to bathing suits for a swim. I walk the beach, snapping the sea cave that gives the cove its name and a 60-foot monolith surrounded by crashing surf. Gray takes orders for hot drinks and sets up a makeshift café on the sand.

Back on the water, Gray points to an island with two low hills and asks us what body part it resembles.

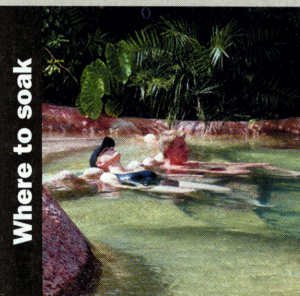
“Breasts,” I guess. Someone else says “scrotum.” “Such lewd suggestions,” he says with a laugh. It’s just a pair of flaring nostrils, the nose of the indigenous Maori chief Hei. The wind is his breath blowing toward the mainland settlement of Hahei, “breath of Hei” in the language of New Zealand’s first people.

“We might do a bit o’ sailing,” Gray says, judging the breeze. We raft up again and fashion a sail from a tarp, using a paddle as a mast. It catches the wind and we’re off, a flotilla of kayaks riding on the breath of a mythical Maori.

A marine reserve protects the ocean creatures in this part of Mercury Bay. I paddle past snorkelers floating prone on the surface and see a blue-eyed penguin torpedo out of the waves. Most of the Coromandel is conservation land ripped from the hands of greedy gold miners and lumber barons who nearly denuded the peninsula in the decades after Captain James Cook came ashore in 1769. Today the sparsely populated peninsula is a Kiwi playground, a getaway for city dwellers on the North Island, with no big hotels blocking the views. Visitors stay in modest beach houses, called bachs, or apartments. I bed down in the only full-service hotel, Puka Park Resort, where cabins were helicoptered onto the site to preserve the surrounding bush. On the porch of my tree house I gaze up at tall kauri trees, the redwoods of New Zealand. I point my Nikon toward the leafy canopy—just one more shot.

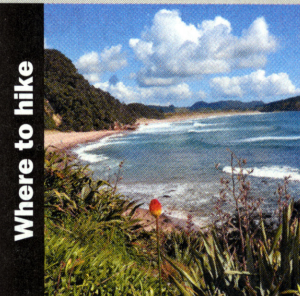
PLAN IT

More to do



Where to soak

Lounge in natural hot springs pools and book a body treatment at **the Lost Spring** (thelostspring.co.nz). Treat yourself to a massage with exotic nut oil or a sugar-rub exfoliation on your feet and lower legs.



Where to hike

The wise and wizened **Kiwi Dundee** (kiwidundee.co.nz), one of New Zealand’s foremost nature guides, leads tramps through the bush. Take a hike overlooking the rocky coast, duck into an abandoned gold-mine shaft or wrap your arms around a kauri tree.



Owner Ruth Pettit of **Colenso Cafe & Shop** (colenso cafe.co.nz) makes herbal teas from ingredients in her garden and serves them with frittata, salad and scones.

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GET THERE Air New Zealand flies nonstop to Auckland from Los Angeles and San Francisco; spring fares start at \$1,500. Rooms at Puka Park Resort (pukapark.co.nz) start at \$200. Rent kayaks from Cathedral Cove Kayaks (seakayaktours.co.nz) for \$80 and up (including tour).

Writer’s trip and airfare assisted by Air New Zealand and Tourism New Zealand.