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Silver ferns, wild surf

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Article from: 

NO TWO people will agree on what makes the perfect beach. Auckland's eastern beaches have soft white sands and gentle waves, but who could resist the black volcanic sand dunes and pounding surf of the Tasman Sea?

Not to mention the swimming holes, streams and waterfalls of a 16,000 hectare temperate rainforest – the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park which, along with the black sand beaches, is just a 30-minute drive from downtown Auckland.

Views from Arataki Visitor Centre, the gateway to all this splendour, reveal a vast forest rolled out like a carpet dyed in multiple shades of green, save for a sprinkle of white wherever manuka tea trees burst into bloom. The forest gives way to the untamed beauty of the black sand beaches I recall from the movie, *The Piano*.

Thoughts of the wonders I would find there have me just about speechless.

The Waitakere Ranges Regional Park was once an underwater volcano. Two million years ago I would have been standing on the seabed 2km under the surface of an ocean.

Auckland spreads across 48 dormant volcanic cones, all of which have erupted in the past 150,000 years. And the chance of a new one bursting into life at some stage in the not-so-distant future is by no means impossible.

I'm still struck by that prospect as we head for the Kitekite Track and on towards the 40m Kitekite Falls.

To reach the falls we pass silver tree ferns (New Zealand's national emblem), ancient kauri trees, rata vine, puriri trees and the rangiora plant, also known as the bushman's friend, due the soft underside of its leaves, which have a range of useful applications.

A stream runs by the track for much of the route and we reach the spectacular falls with very little effort. We stay some time in the clean, moist air. Then it's time to take a look at the beach. We've already caught a distant glimpse of Piha beach and the iconic Lion Rock. Now we're on the strange black sands. They are rich in titanium, mica and iron and, to demonstrate just that, Elaine, our guide from Bush and Beach, whips out a magnet which is quickly covered in quartz-shaped sand particles.

Piha's rock outcrops and the dunes are daunting spectacles – almost as daunting as the raging surf – and as I stride along the beach I'm transfixed by the rugged nature of the place.

The sky is now a milky white. A grey-white glare gives the scene an extra edge and I am struck by Piha's special beauty.

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Now, however, we need to keep on the move if we want to take a look at the equally dramatic Karekare beach.

I wonder why there aren't hundreds of people on Karekare beach. Well, for one, by now it's blowing a real gale. We slog across the sprawling grey-black shore in the wind, sea tumultuous, sands threatening to strike like tiny little shreds of shrapnel. It's not the kind of beach I'm used to. I keep my anorak on.

Just when I think I've seen everything that is unusual in a beach, I sight Karekare Surf Club clinging with a white-knuckle grip but half-buried, nevertheless, in the strange black sands.

But this is not the present surf club, I am reminded. The one I see before me had to be dug out of the sands every season, so it has been replaced by a new one, just beyond the dunes.

We walk there and I observe a solitary flag. Where's the other? Today it's likely to have been blown back to downtown Auckland.

I leave Karekare beach and return to the rainforest. Now the air becomes calm and we take the so-called Auckland City Walk to see 1000-year-old kauri trees, one with a girth of 6.5m. There are mature totara trees, too. These giants were once used to make Maori canoes.

So the day ends, enjoying the flora of the rainforest. The seemingly delicate rata vine, given time, develops into a sinuously formed tree. The bushman's mattress fern, so soft and feathery, was used to bed down on. The basil bush, once used for toothache, is now found in marinades. The black supplejack vine is so strong it holds the weight of a man, yet its delicate asparagus-like tips are edible.

These and other strange, wonderful places make Auckland's environs special.



Karekare beach. Picture: Tourism NZ

- The essentials

FLY Brisbane to Auckland in three hours. Virgin www.virginblue.com.au

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Auckland's CBD is a 45-minute drive from Auckland International Airport, on a good run. The flat rate Airbus (approximately \$NZ15) is a better option than a taxi (about \$NZ50, minimum).

www.airbus.co.nz

The Art Deco-era Mercure Hotel Windsor is a former bank and commercial building on Queen St in the heart of the CBD. Shops and the waterfront precinct are moments away. For a small boutique style hotel, Mercure Windsor offers a broad range of facilities including spa, gymnasium, plunge pool, a garden courtyard, and many rooms have a compact kitchen. There is in-house dining at Vault Restaurant and some of Auckland's best restaurants are within walking distance. Rates and specials www.accor.com

Auckland's hop-on, hop-off, Explorer Bus presents a good overview of the city and main attractions.

www.explorerbus.co.nz

To get around the inner city, take the free City Circuit bus. The Link Bus is another cheap way of getting around if you prefer not to walk. Routes and additional information www.aucklandnz.com

For more information about Waitakere Ranges Regional Park contact Auckland Regional Council

www.arc.govt.nz

Bush and Beach guided eco-tours run daily. Tel 09 837 4130. www.bushandbeach.co.nz

Margaret Turton was a guest of Accor and Tourism Auckland

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