

Historic Bay of Islands – 1 Around Russell

Russell Heritage

Early Russell was known as the Hellhole of the Pacific, the haunt of British and foreign whalers, renegade seamen, criminals and various other of humanity's offscourings. Today's Russell is as far removed from its early history as it is possible to be – beautiful, tranquil, and centrepiece of the equally beautiful and tranquil Bay of Islands.

Russell is an easy 3½ hours' drive from Auckland via Whangarei, Kawakawa to Opuia and car ferry to Okiata.

An alternative route is the now fully tar-sealed Old Russell Road north of Whangarei. This is a picturesque, if sometimes winding, road travelling past coastal bays and in parts through native bush. Many visitors travel to Russell by one route and return by the other.

Russell has enough "must see" places that the town is virtually a museum in its own right.

The Duke of Marlborough Hotel, for instance. The hotel stands on a site purchased in 1827 and still holds New Zealand's No 1 hotel licence, first issued in 1840. The present building is the fourth structure and was built in 1932.

The Police Station, next door to the hotel, was originally the Custom House. It was built in 1870 of heart kauri. The huge tree on the roadside outside the station is a Moreton Bay fig.

Christ Church is New Zealand's oldest existing church. It was built in 1835 with donations from settlers, including one from Charles Darwin who was visiting Russell at the time. The outside walls still carry scars from musket balls during the 1845 sacking of the town. The church stands on ground gifted by Maori on the understanding that both races had equal rights of burial in the churchyard.

Pompallier House at the southern end of the waterfront is New Zealand's oldest surviving Roman Catholic building. It was built in 1841-42 under the direction of architect Louis Perret, as the printery, tannery and storehouse for the French Marist mission. The ground floor was built of rammed earth (pise de terre) the upper floor of rammed earth panels in a kauri framework (pan de bois).

In 1856 the French sold the property to James Callaghan who used it as a tannery until 1863. The building was later altered to become a private home for over 70 years. It was then bought by the New Zealand Government and opened to the public as Pompallier House.

Now known as Pompallier, the building has undergone extensive award-winning conservation and is now a working museum, where tanning, printing and bookbinding can be seen. It is surrounded by an attractive garden, recreated as like as possible to the original.

The property is now administered by the Historic Places Trust.

In summer, Pompallier operates as a working museum with interpreters demonstrating tanning, leatherwork, printing and binding crafts. It is open throughout the year.

(Admission fee applies)

The Bungalow stands next to Pompallier. It was built in 1852 as the home of James Reddy Clendon, the first American consul. The property was later used as a boarding house, but has since been restored to its original charming appearance by the National Historic Places Trust.

Russell Museum

The town of Russell in Northland was one of New Zealand's earliest European settlements and the Russell Museum houses a fascinating collection covering the early years of European-Maori contact. It is also an interesting store of items covering the history of the Bay of Islands.

The museum is in the heart of Russell, next to the Department of Conservation Visitor Centre and close to Christ Church, the country's oldest church, and Pompallier, the country's first industrial building.

Exhibits include a 1/5th scale model of Captain Cook's *Endeavour*, Maori artifacts, memorabilia and exhibits from the whaling days, famed American author, Zane Grey's big-game fishing souvenirs, period clothes and many other items.

The museum shop specialises in New Zealand treasures and books about Northland.

Open every day except Christmas Day
(Admission fee applies)

Flagstaff Hill, Russell

You can walk or drive up Flagstaff Hill. From the flagstaff, panoramic views are obtained across to Opuia, Paihia, Waitangi, Moturoa, Ninepin and several other islands, and of course there are splendid views looking down on Russell itself.

In 1844 the flagstaff became the focus of Maori discontent and over the next ten months the pole was felled four times by Hone Heke and his warriors. On the last occasion, Russell was abandoned by its residents and the town, with the exception of the church and missionary buildings, was sacked. After 1846 Russell was gradually rebuilt. A plaque at the foot of the flagstaff gives a full account of the events and personalities involved.

Opuia

A regular vehicular ferry runs the short distance between Opuia and Okiato, from where the motorist drives to Russell, about 9 kms. Opuia has always been an important New Zealand port. Until the 1970s frozen meat, dairy products and other cargo were shipped overseas. Today it is a favourite port of entry for yachts arriving from the Pacific. There is also a large yacht marina and extensive marine maintenance facilities.

Opuia – Paihia Walkway

Part of the New Zealand Walkway system, this 7-8 km walk starts near the Opuia wharf and takes about 3½ hours. The walk follows the shoreline where possible and part of it crosses a mangrove forest on a boardwalk. The track is well-signposted all the way.

Opuia Forest

Many well-defined walks and magnificent views are to be found in the Opuia Forest. For full details and a map, contact the Paihia Public Relations Office or the Department of Conservation.

Waiomio Caves

The caves are about 5 km south of Kawakawa on State Highway One. There are three caves – Waiomio Cave, Roku's Cave and Tahu's Cave. Each contains fine examples of stalactites and stalagmites and many glow-worms. The area was visited by Charles Darwin in 1835, although he did not visit the caves themselves. He described the scene above ground as being of "some singular masses of limestone, resembling ruined castles." Your guide will tell you the fascinating history of the caves during your 40-minutes underground.

(Admission fee applies)

Paihia

There is always something going on in Paihia. To find out what, especially in holiday periods, you need to watch the newspapers or contact the Paihia Public Relations Office.

Like Russell, directly opposite across the bay, Paihia is also a focal point of early New Zealand history. The first church was here, built of raupo reeds by the Reverend Henry Williams in 1823. He also established a Sunday school and day school.

His brother William arrived three years later. A year later again, in 1837, after studying the Maori language, he published his translation of the New Testament.

Earlier, in 1834, William Colenso arrived with a hand-operated printing press and within a few months had printed New Zealand's first book in Maori, the Epistle to the Philippians and Ephesians. Within five years he had printed 74,000 books or booklets.

Waitangi

The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi was signed on the large open space between the Treaty House and the sea. To reach Waitangi, cross the bridge just a short drive around the waterfront from Paihia. The car park is just past the Waitangi Hotel. From there you walk to the Visitors' Centre.

You can also view the world's largest canoe, a 36-metre Maori war canoe. The story of its construction, traditional wood splicing, lashing, caulking and carving is told in the Canoe House. It was built for the 1940 Centennial commemorations of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi.

The Treaty House was designed by the colonial architect, John Verge of New South Wales, for the British Resident, James Busby. In 1932 the house and surrounding 500 hectares were gifted to the nation by Lord Bledisloe. The original house plans were used in its restoration.

Kawakawa

In its heyday Kawakawa produced what was recognised as the country's best steam coal. It was discovered in 1864 and a horse-drawn wooden tramway was built to Taumarere, from where it was shipped down-river to Opuia to be loaded aboard ships. The government took over the line in 1877 and extended it to Opuia, then known as Newport.

A small flax industry was also developed in Kawakawa and, later, a kauri gum-digging industry.

Kawakawa today is well-known as Train Town - the railway line runs down the middle of the main street. In place of the Opuia-Auckland Express and freight trains to and from the port of Opuia, a small steam train now runs scenic tourist trips from Kawakawa to Opuia and return.

In 1975 the internationally regarded Austrian painter, philosopher, architect and ecologist **Friedrich Hundertwasser** settled near Kawakawa. In 1997 he was commissioned to design and build the town's public toilet block. Its ceramic columns, garden roof and curving, colourful exuberance have become a favourite comfort-stop – and a great camera subject - on the international tourist route.

Hundertwasser encouraged the use of local labour and talent. Tiles for the project were made by Kawakawa school pupils, bricks were recycled from local buildings and blocks were built from old bottles from around the district.

In 2000, Creative New Zealand awarded the structure the Premier Award in Urban and Landscape Design. The building thus joined other notable Hundertwasser projects around the world, everything from postage stamps to major architectural projects, including the Hundertwasser Haus apartment complex in Vienna, the redesign of a Danube cruise ship, a winery in Napa (California) and a ceramic mural in Lisbon.

This year (2002) the town is to erect a new eastern entrance featuring a design prepared by Hundertwasser before his death in February 2000.

Ruapekapeka Pa

Near Kawakawa is Ruapekapeka Pa, an old Maori fortification which was the scene of the last battle of the Northern Wars in 1846. The site is about 1000 metres above sea level and provides far-reaching views of Northland.

The battle was between Te Ruki Kawiti and his force of 500 against Lt Col Despard and his force of 1500, along with loyalist chiefs Waka Nene, Patuone, Rapa and others and their combined forces of 450.

The pa has been described as an extraordinary example of fortified earthworks which show the speed with which Maori warriors adapted their warfare methods to the use of firearms.