

Hauraki Gulf and the Islands of the Gulf

The Hauraki Gulf is considered the jewel in Auckland city's crown. An outstandingly beautiful gulf with a myriad of islands it provides a setting of splendour surrounding the city. The harbour, closest to the city and part of the gulf, is named Waitemata, which translates from Maori as sparkling water. This name is fitting.

Auckland is surrounded by water with few places are more than two hours by car from a sea shore. It is this that shapes the life style of the city and the reason this major city developed at this location. The sheltered waters made it easy for early transport and later for ships of trade.

History

Auckland's history is closely linked to the sea. Historically the ancestors of all New Zealanders both Polynesian and European had to cross vast quantities of it to reach these shores, taking daring and lengthy journeys. They were marine based peoples.

The sheltered gulf provided for early inhabitants, the Maori tribes who resided here, as a food source and a safe waterway. Both the Waitemata on the east coast and Manukau Harbour, on the west coast also provided a natural defence for resident Maori tribes. Prime waterside points on the harbour were the sites for villages or maraes. Maori used the high points to give good visibility of any visitors or warriors preparing to arrive by sea. At Bastion Point, the prime site over-looking the Waitemata, the Ngati Whatua tribe still has their marae.

City of Sails

Today, Auckland is often called the City of Sails which is due to the large numbers of its inhabitants who enjoy the sea sailing for pleasure or for sport. Several marinas are crowded with craft from huge superyachts to tiny dinghies. During the weekend races for yachts fill the Waitemata Harbour with sails. Visitors can enjoy a sail cruise aboard a number of vessels from America's cup sleek

racing yachts to sailing tri-marans to old fashioned timber yachts of a bygone era.

Experiencing the Gulf

For visitors to Auckland it is easy to get out and experience the Hauraki Gulf and Waitemata Harbour aboard the popular and reliable ferry services as well as sightseeing cruises. Devonport, on the northern side of the harbour, Rangitoto Island and Waiheke island are the most common destinations each offering a taste of the gulf and islands beyond the city. These three destinations are available by frequent ferry services from the harbourside Ferry Terminal on Quay Street.

Devonport

Devonport is a short journey, about 10 minutes, across the inner harbour. The frequent ferry service is mainly used by commuting locals from Auckland's North Shore to the city for work. Devonport's is a quiet seaside suburb with historic origins – many of the buildings and homes are wooden and built early last century. The charming village has an outlook over the harbour and gulf. There are plenty of cafes and antique shops for browsing and beaches for picnics. There are also two steep volcanoes which are popular lookout points, North Head and Mount Victoria, which are worth the effort walking up to appreciate the panoramic views.

Rangitoto Island

Rangitoto Island is an icon of Auckland. The beautiful symmetrical volcanic cone is treasured by locals and often photographed by tourists. It appears as the same shape whichever way it is viewed. Now a regional park, the island is almost entirely covered in hardy native trees, especially pohutukawa. As a destination there is really only one thing to do and that is to climb to the top. The climb is free and not difficult although deceptively long and half a day is required by most for the return journey. There is also a train ride to the top. At the peak the 360 degree view is magnificent.

Waiheke Island

Waiheke Island is one of Auckland's favourite playgrounds. Frequent services of powerful passenger ferries make the trip in about 35 minutes. The island has a permanent population of about 8000 people, many of whom make the daily trip into the city to work. The island is very popular as a holiday destination, and its beautiful beaches are surrounded by holiday homes.

The island has an art and craft trail, and the arts centre lies just outside the main township Oneroa. The vineyards of Waiheke are renowned for excellent red wines and they bring wine enthusiasts from near and far, wine tours can be taken or rental cars and bikes hired. Other activities include walking and bird watching, sea kayaking, fishing and sailing or just beach combing. Great restaurants and cafes add to the gourmet experience.

Tiritiri Matangi

Other islands of the gulf which can easily be explored are Tiritiri Matangi, the Department of conservation bird Reserve Island and Great Barrier Island. Tiritiri Matangi is a full day trip and ferries do not go every day. It is worth putting a day aside to enjoy this special island where many native birds have been re-established and cared for by conservationists, they are very tame without any predators.

Great Barrier

Great Barrier Island is about a three hour ferry ride and visitors should allow a day or two for their visit at the least. Once on the island there is a lot of exploring, walks, white sand beaches so it is good to take a tour or hire a rental car, stay overnight one or two or more nights. A short flight is also available from the main Auckland airport to the island. Accommodation includes resort lodges, bed& breakfasts to back packer accommodation.

Kawau Island

The island furthest out in the gulf northern most is Kawau Island which ferries visit for the day from down town. This

island was once the home of the first Governor General. Here he built a wonderful home, Mansion House, and established an exotic garden of plants and trees from around the world – some magnificent specimens form the backdrop to the lawns of the extensive garden. The house and garden are open to the public. There are almost no roads on this island but visitors can hop around the bays by water taxi or walk the many walking trails.

If time is short it is worth just a ferry ride there and back to one of the islands to enjoy the gulf.