

TRAVEL NEW ZEALAND

Northern exposure

Often overshadowed by its southern cousin's majestic vistas, the North Island offers its own natural wonders, writes Ute Junker.

Kate Malcolm has had a good day in the office. "We saw 20 to 30 stingrays stacked up like squadron bombers beneath Northern Arch, a 12-metre-wide underwater archway," says the co-owner of Dive! Tutukaka in New Zealand's Northland region. As winter draws closer, she anticipates many more great dives lie ahead.

Diving in a New Zealand winter may sound like an endurance test, but in Tutukaka, the waters are welcoming all year. They are crystal clear and surprisingly warm, thanks to the East Australian Current that sweeps down from the Coral Sea. Air temperatures are also milder than elsewhere in New Zealand – "in May and June, we're still sitting around 20 degrees; the coldest we get is 15 or 16 degrees."

That makes getting in the water an inviting prospect, particularly when the diving is so spectacular. Named one of the world's top 10 dive sites by Jacques Cousteau, the Poor Knights Islands, 45 minutes off the Tutukaka Coast, are home to an extraordinary array of marine life, including tropical and subtropical species. Divers and snorkellers alike are blown away by what lies beneath the waves. "We have five species of wrasse, six species of moray eels, immense numbers of schooling fish. We have pelagic fish coming through, dolphins and pseudo orcas, we have turtles," says Malcolm.

"You can see big kingfish and pink maomao and tiny little gobies amid the rocks, which are beautifully encrusted with colourful algae and sponges. It's pretty epic." The Tutukaka Coast may be on the bucket list of serious divers around the world, but many Australian travellers are unaware of its existence. And it's just one of the underrated attractions tucked away on New Zealand's North Island.

Often overshadowed by the South Island's magnificent fjords and snow-capped peaks, the North Island has plenty of natural wonders of its own. There are the kauri forests, home to ancient towering trees, including some of New Zealand's oldest specimens in the Waipoua Forest. There are high-altitude hikes through otherworldly landscapes such as the Tongariro Crossing, regarded as the country's best one-day hike.

There are countless islands, from Waitheke Island, with its wineries and boutique hotels, to Great Barrier Island, powered entirely off the grid and designated as a dark sky sanctuary. There are buzzing cities such as Auckland and Wellington. There are acclaimed wine regions such as Hawke's Bay, Gisborne and Waipara.



A huge proportion of our guests come back year after year – and these are people who could afford to go anywhere in the world. Vicki Febery, Poronui Lodge

North Island highlights include diving at Tutukaka (top and top right). The 6500-hectare estate at Poronui lodge in the Taharua Valley, above right, offers trout fishing (above) and horseback expeditions (below right).

And there is skiing. In fact, if you are looking for the highest ski fields in New Zealand, the North Island's Mount Ruapehu is the place to go. The volcanic terrain makes for memorable skiing. "The topography gives you a real sense of journey," says Travis Donoghue of Ruapehu Alpine Lifes. "On some slopes you have a sense of space; elsewhere the trails work their ways around crags, hidden troughs and valleys." Both of Ruapehu's ski fields are covered



Need to know

For more see Dive! Tutukaka at diving.co.nz; mtruapehu.com for skiing; and poronui.com



Brightwell, which include a 10-metre high carving of Ngatoroirangi, the Maori navigator who guided the Tūwharetoa and Te Arawa tribes to the Taupō area more than 1000 years ago.

Febery is the director of tourism and marketing at Westervelt, which runs the Poronui sporting lodge in the Taharua Valley between Taupo and Napier. A born and bred North Islander, Febery says the beauty of the North Island lies in its diversity.

"You have these incredible landscapes, whether it's the Coromandel Peninsula or the Bay of Islands, you have caves, you have geysers, you have Lake Taupo, the largest lake in the southern hemisphere. And the thing about the North Island is everything is close together. You can do something different every day."

Poronui may be one of New Zealand's smallest luxury lodges, with just seven rooms, but its 6500-hectare estate offers a range of terrain, from rolling hills to native beech forest for hiking, biking, hunting and fishing. It's a combination that has ensured high repeat business.

"A huge proportion of our guests come back year after year – and these are people who could afford to go anywhere in the world," Febery says. "Some have been coming for more than 20 years. Some come for the hunting, many come for the back-country fishing, which is just incredible. You can catch both brown and rainbow trout and, unlike the South Island, you won't have a stretch of river bank to yourself."

"You don't have to love fishing or hunting to enjoy Poronui; its roster of activities ranges from horseback expeditions to cooking lessons to Maori cultural experiences. "We have a local elder who comes and does really lovely experiences tailored to the guests' interests – whether that is food, language or history. He starts his culture in different ways – it could be a walk or over a meal, cooked on hot rocks in a hangi pit."

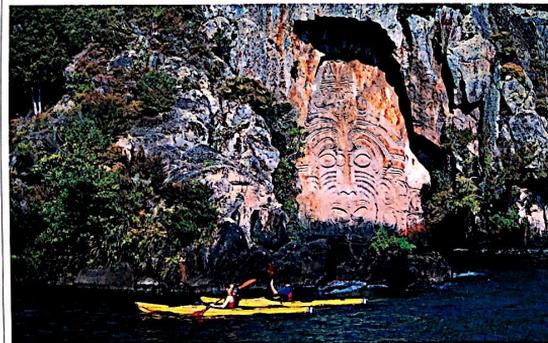
by the same ski pass. Whakapapa is ideally suited for beginners through to medium skiers; the more challenging Turoa has the highest chairlift in the country.

"Because we're significantly higher than Coronet Peak – their ski area is roughly equivalent [in altitude] to where our car park is – our season is longer," says Donoghue. "We typically start a little later but we expect the season to run through to the end of October."

The long season makes Ruapehu a great base for exploring the North Island, Donoghue says. "We have so many iconic landscapes around us, from the Waitomo Caves [where you can take a boat ride through glow-worm grottoes] to Rotorua."

Rotorua's combination of geothermal Belts – featuring spouting geysers and naturally heated rivers – and Maori culture makes it a popular destination, but with 60 per cent of Maori people living in the Bay of Plenty, Auckland, Waikato and Northland regions, Maori culture can be experienced across the island, with marae stays available from Waitheke Island near Auckland to Hokianga Harbour in Northland.

Even Lake Taupo offers First Nations experiences. "The carvings at Mine Bay are incredible," says Vicki Febery of the work of Maori sculptor Matahi Whakatika.



One of Maori sculptor Matahi Whakatika-Brightwell's dramatic rock carvings at Mine Bay on Lake Taupo.

PHOTO: IAN