

Tree of life

Tane Mahuta, the 2,000-year-old kauri tree god, features heavily in Maori lore



Life studies The crown of the grand kauri tree sustains a wealth of life — 40 species of plants, ferns and nesting birds; a cleaning station IMAGES: MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA

Before I can enter the Waipoua Forest in New Zealand's Northland, I have to pass through a cleaning station, where I brush and wash the soles of my shoes to prevent anything foreign from entering the wilderness. Inside the forest, a handful of people stand gazing up in reverence at a mighty, 51.5-metre tall giant, their hands clasped in prayer, their feet bare. Like me, they are here to meet the Maori tree god and living giant — Tā ne Mahuta.

As Charles Naera, the Maori guide from local tour outfit Footprints Waipoua, leads me into the forest, the dense canopy blocks out the sun, the temperature drops and the sounds of the world fade away. "We believe in elemental gods," Naera says. "God of the sea, god of the winds, and the god of the forest Tā ne Mahuta."

No one needs to point Tā ne out to me. In this sacred place of green and gold, the tree god is luminous — its trunk pale and shimmering — and enormous, its branched crown rising high above the canopy.

Tā ne Mahuta is a 2,000-year-old kauri tree that dominates the forest and features heavily in Maori lore. The native, evergreen kauri (pronounced 'co-dy') is a New Zealand treasure with an immense lifespan. This particular spe-

cimen is 248 cubic metres of solid timber, with a nearly 14m girth. Though its trunk is free of appendages, the crown sustains a wealth of life with 40 species of plants, ferns, and nesting birds. "A forest within a forest," Naera says.

The Waipoua Forest is one of the last remaining kauri strongholds; a place revered by the Maori people, but that is not the only reason why visitors clean or surrender their shoes at the entrance. As an isolated country with unique ecosystems, New Zealand has adopted strict bio-security measures to ensure protection of its native flora and fauna. Cleaning stations in forest areas are just one such measure. At the country's entry points, checks are in place for foreign seeds and fruits that could potentially spread plant disease. Before I'm allowed to exit Auckland airport and step onto New Zealand soil, officials ask me if I'm carrying food or shoes recently worn in wilderness areas. Carrying these items into the country is not prohibited, as long you declare them at the border and comply with the requisite security checks.

Face tattoos worn by Maori chiefs use a pigment made of melted kauri gum

Travel log



Getting There

Fly Singapore Airlines from India to Auckland, and Waipoua Forest is around three-and-a-half hours away by car.



Things to do

En route the forest, stop for stunning hilltop views of Hokianga Harbour, where the first Maori explorer is believed to have landed.

BLink Tip

While arriving in New Zealand, keep all food items and hiking shoes in an accessible place and declare them at the border, where they are likely to be checked.

One of the aims of these bio-security measures is to safeguard the endangered kauri forests. When the early Europeans arrived in New Zealand in the 1800s, they found the sturdy kauri perfectly suited to their boat-building needs. Swathes of native forest were felled for timber. In 100 years, over 90 per cent of the country's widespread kauri forest was wiped out. What remains is a scattered 7,455 hectares. Today, though it is illegal to cut down a kauri tree, a new threat has emerged. Kauri dieback is a fungal disease of the root system, which currently has no cure.

As we take in the sights of the forest, Naera tells us of the significance of the kauri in Maori history. Before the Europeans, Maori were the first settlers on New Zealand, arriving roughly a thousand years ago at Hokianga Harbour, very close to the Waipoua Forest in Northland, the country's northernmost area. The far north of the country continues to be home to a strong Maori culture.

The gum of the kauri tree, which looks like molten gold, was used as varnish. Intricate face tattoos worn by Maori chiefs use a pigment made of melted kauri gum, fish liver oil, and the soot of burnt kauri bark. But perhaps the most significant is how the kauri ties into the Maori story of creation.

In the beginning, the sky father and the earth mother were in an eternal embrace. Their children, the elemental gods, lived between them in a world of darkness. To try and separate their parents, the gods stood with their feet on their mother's chest and hands against their father, but failed to push them apart. Tā ne, however, lay with his back and shoulders against his mother, and with all his might, pushed his father up with his feet, flooding the darkness with light. Though Tā ne was successful, he found he was rooted to the spot. Unable to explore the light-filled world, he created his own, consisting of the plants, birds, and insects of the New Zealand bush. All the wilderness' creatures are Tā ne's creation. To the Maori, he is the great separator and the Lord of the forest.

Naera recounts this haunting story as we stand on a wooden boardwalk beneath the immense Tā ne Mahuta, at the place where, from his shoulders, roots run into mother earth. Possibly the only spot in the world where humans can truly stand on the shoulders of a giant.

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