

PLACES IN THE HEART

MANGONUI, NZ

BLUE HEAVEN



Childhood holiday flashbacks at a Northland coastal settlement

JANE NICHOLLS

As I follow fish around the rocks at Matai Bay, a Kodachrome-toned memory of a long-ago summer holiday floats into my mind. Picnicking near the mouth of an estuary at Manning Point, on the north coast of NSW, we found a log big enough for several kids to sit astride and rode it with the fast-flowing tide towards the sea, jumping off just in time to drag it back upstream to do it again ... and again.

Those beach holidays with family friends were long before devices — our rental units didn't even have TVs — yet a fortnight went by as fast as my snowy-haired brother on his surf mat. Comic books and chocolate milks, sandy sheets and bunk beds and skin as salty as the sausages heavy with tomato sauce and wrapped in slices of soft white bread that we wolfed down at barbecue tables behind the dunes.

Four decades on, I'm keen to capture the simple magic of childhood holidays for my own family, so we head to Doubtless Bay in the Far North District of New Zealand, my husband's home country.

Our holiday rental is in Mangonui, about 300km by road from Auckland. This old



whaling township has a nationally famous fish and chippery, and a harbour so picture perfect that if you saw it on a postcard you'd assume it had been digitally altered.

Mabel's is an 1860s cottage right on Mill Bay, restored, furnished and decorated with love, its kauri floorboards holding more than a century of stories, and an art collection unlike any I've seen in other rentals, let alone the bare walls of childhood holiday flats.

The cottage is named for Mabel Thorburn, who lived here in the 1950s and planted shrubs, flowers and climbers all around the common land, some of which live on and add to Mangonui's subtropical vibe.

There's a well-researched heritage trail through the town, and cafes, craft shops and a pub, so while it feels far from everywhere, Mangonui has a gentle buzz.

Our host, Richard Dunbar, has left us home-baked bread, which is still warm and

wrapped in a tea towel, wine and coffee. The house is airy and has gorgeous views across its cottage garden to the bay. The roomy kitchen has a 50s vibe, with brightly painted cupboards, a little pull-out chopping board and no dishwasher. But there is Wi-Fi — I'm nostalgic, but not enough to spark a family mutiny. Already I'm wishing we had booked two weeks, not one.

I fix myself a gin and tonic and sit on the deck watching an Australasian gannet spear into the water at speed as the sun sets behind Rangikapiti Pa, a historic site connected to the local Maori iwi, Ngati Kahu.

Northland was one of the first areas to be settled by Polynesian voyagers and home to numerous pas, or defensive refuges. This one is a beauty, with sweeping views over Mangonui and Doubtless Bay, as we discover when we walk up it next morning. You could certainly see your enemies coming from here,

but today all before us is classic Kiwi scenery of green hills and blue water. The cicadas are so loud I can almost feel my organs vibrating as we go back.

This is as far north as I've been in the Land of the Long White Cloud and we head to Cable Bay for our first swim. The beaches are white, unlike many of the black-sand beaches in this volcano-rich country. Call me shallow, but I prefer my sand on the golden side. We swim in gentle surf, lounge on the sand, swim some more and marvel at how far we can see, so clear is the water.

I walk across State Highway 10, which in reality is a single-lane road, for ice creams from the Cable Bay Store, a bright blue fibro building with a giant snow cone smashed into its roof. In my rose-hued memories, the corner stores of my family holidays were all like this. But here, too, are modern glass cabinets filled with fresh quiches and pies and cakes, as



JOURNEYS

Dreaming of just deserts

LEE TULLOCH

I only knew the painted deserts of TV cowboy dramas or midday movies as I grew up. As a coastal dweller, any desert seemed a flat and dry thing to me, devoid of anything much except the odd cactus, and usually rendered in black and white on the small

screen. It was only when I saw Lawrence of Arabia in Cinemascope — Peter O'Toole, pale blue eyes blazing like an oasis; Omar Sharif, smouldering like frankincense on a burner — that I became fascinated by the landscape of the desert.

Of course, at that stage I was really fascinated by the romantic characters that inhabited it, but I began to imagine myself on a camel or horse, wrapped in a turban, galloping through the Arabian dunes, and wished very much I was there, not in suburban Melbourne.

Later on, I was enthralled by the erotic Bertolucci film adaptation of Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*, in which Deborah Winger is kidnapped by a tattooed Berber chieftain and taken to his kasbah in the Moroccan desert for pornographic acts.

Although I dreamed about being Isabelle Eberhardt, who dressed as a man and travelled with the Berbers through Algeria in 1900, or Gertrude Bell, an archaeologist, writer and British spy who journeyed



through Arabia as the equal of sheiks during World War I, those kind of scenarios weren't to be for me. Modern life is much tamer. The world's deserts are reachable by plane and four-wheel drive now. No need for the camel.

And about every inch of the world has been mapped and Instagrammed.

When I finally did step foot in a desert of Lawrence of Arabia magnificence, it was grander and more beautiful than anything

Four-wheel driving in the Rub' al Khali desert in the UAE



Clockwise from far left, Mangonui Harbour; Mabel's holiday cottage; Mangonui Fish Shop; Matai Bay

IN THE KNOW

The adjacent townships of Taipa, Cable Bay, Coopers Beach, and Mangonui lie along the curve of Doubtless Bay on the far northeast coast of the North Island.

■ newzealand.com

STAY Mabel's Cottage is thoughtfully appointed, with ample room for a family of four. At high tide, it's about 10 steps from the door for a swim. The hosts also manage a range of other local holiday properties.

■ mangonuiholidayhomes.co.nz

PLAY The absolute must-do is Harrison's Cape Runner tour to New Zealand's northernmost point. The all-day tour departs from Kaitaia, about 30 minutes from Mangonui. Guests travel all the way to spectacular Cape Reinga, a sacred place for Maori who believe it's where spirits of the recently departed leave earth. The return trip, aboard a fleet of 4WDs ingeniously converted to "truck buses", is along 90 Mile Beach.

■ harrisonscapereingatours.co.nz

well as fish and chips and a huge range of ice creams. Since the 50s, Kiwis have boasted about their Tip Top Jelly Tips and they are pretty yummy.

Cable Bay Store also sells milk in returnable glass bottles from Far North dairy farm Bella Vacca, which is another throwback that makes my heart sing. With jersey-cow cream on top, this milk was born of farmers who pivoted to do something special when they were faced with unsustainable prices from dairy giant Fonterra.

We settle into a routine of sleep-ins, creamy milk on cereal and mugs of tea on our sunny deck. The daily decisions are which beach to target for bodysurfing and snorkelling, whether to bother with lunch and what to have for dinner.

Northland is garnering attention as a food and wine destination, and local supermarkets have a good array of fresh produce.

There's also a fruit and veg caravan parked at Cable Beach, so we stop there most days for tomatoes, cobs of corn, sweet watermelons, crunchy cucumbers and lettuce.

I discover Apatu Aqua, a renowned fish smokehouse, is also right here, and open for retail. They'll smoke the fish you catch, too, but despite dangling the odd line in the bay in front of Mabel's, it's not a service we need. Manuka-smoked trevally, snapper and kingfish are just a few of Apatu Aqua's ethically harvested offerings so fish and salad becomes our no-fuss dinner.

On the days I'm too lazy to prepare even that, we stroll down the hill from Mabel's Cottage to the Mangonui Fish Shop, soaking up the spectacular view of the harbour on the way. Built out over the water, this is the only place up here where we encounter a crowd, but it's all speedily managed. The provenance of the mostly line-caught fish is all listed and the double beer-battered chips are eye-poppingly good.

Richard has given us a list of his favourite beaches; he indicates Matai Bay is a little crowded for him and recommends we try Puheke. We're grateful for his written directions as we navigate gravel roads on the Karikari Peninsula and, when we arrive, I'm spirited right back to the pristine, nothing-for-miles beaches of my youth.

On our way home, Richard says to stop at Lake Rotopokaka, or Coca-Cola Lake, where the water is fresh and clean, stained brown by natural tannins. The local Maori believe the lake has healing properties and it's refreshing to dip here and get the sand and salt off before heading back to Mangonui.

While I am bodysurfing perfect little waves at Puheke, my teenage daughters disappear for a walk and return raving about a tree swing they've found hidden in a cove.

More than a year later, they still talk about that swing. I ask why, and one volunteers that of all our holidays, finding the swing is her standout memory.

"It was the wonder of discovering something you didn't expect, it felt like an adventure, and we didn't have our phones with us, so there are no photos ... it feels like a magical moment in time."

Hollywood could convey. The Rub' al Khali, or Empty Quarter, as it is known, covers most of the southern third of the Arabian Peninsula, and includes parts of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Oman.

It's unimaginably huge at 650,000sq km and its tallest sand dune is 800m high. In fact, it's pretty much all sand dunes, enormous apricot-coloured mountains, repeating a thousand miles into the distance, carved by the wind, their faces shifting and sharpening with every gust.

Walking up one of these sand mountains before sunrise, alone except for a guide, and reaching a peak just as the sun came up was one of the most profound experiences of my life. Why? Because deserts aren't empty and they're not silent, and a person becomes without ego, just another sound and scent in the vast, natural world.

Last year, I went "glamping" in the Moroccan Sahara, which is increasingly a popular thing to do. It's so trendy that the

large sand dunes at Erg Chebbi, where most tourists head to stay in permanent camps, are as busy as Bourke Street at rush hour. Fortunately, tour operator Abercrombie & Kent has sequestered its own spot of desert far from the throng, and we were housed in handsome military tents.

Again, what seems like silence is full of birdsong, insects, and the sounds of sand and wind, when you attune your ears.

Anyone who has spent time in the Australian centre knows that desert is thrumming with life.

I feel more at home here than almost anywhere else. Perhaps, even in my comfortable 21st-century life, I'm visited by the ghost of Gertrude Bell.

I still haven't found my Berber sheik but the tribes still proudly exist and trade at the markets. Many eke out livings taking tourists on camel rides. En route to the Sahara camp, the handsome camel driver gave me his turban and showed me how to wrap it. That will have to do.

FAB FOUR ROOMS WITH STELLAR VIEWS

Sleep under the stars in these dreamy lodgings

LAUREN HILL



KACHI LODGE, BOLIVIA

The world's largest salt flat, Salar de Uyuni, sits at an altitude of 3660m above sea level and spans almost 11,000sq km of southwest Bolivia. The area is famed for its dark skies and the spellbinding effect they have on the ground, which reflects the stars during wet season (December to April) and remains bright white during the dry months (May to November). Sustainably built Kachi Lodge became the first permanent accommodation of its kind here when it made its debut last year. Six guest-domes fashioned from inter-

connected equilateral triangles accompany a main dome, where the people behind Bolivia's acclaimed restaurant Proyecto Nativa introduce guests to the country's local ingredients and wines. Use the lodge as a base to explore the flats by day, then take a closer look at the night sky through the lodge's telescope and gaze up at the star-filled heavens from your dome's bed. Each stand-alone suite comes with bespoke furnishings, handwoven textiles, and paintings by artist Gaston Ugalde, known as the Andean Andy Warhol; kachilodge.com.

KAKSLAUTTANEN ARCTIC RESORT, FINLAND

Pristine Arctic scenery and the Northern Lights draw travellers to Finnish Lapland each year. Kakslauttanen Arctic Resort is tucked into the forested landscape of Saariselkä, a gateway to the trails and slopes of Urho Kekkonen National Park in the far north. Cosy log cabins come with saunas and wood-burning fires, and snow igloos make for a unique one-night-only experience. But for unrivalled views of nature's light show and the night sky in comfort, choose a glass igloo or one of the newly built kelo-glass igloos (pictured), which combine a traditional log cabin (kelo is a native pine) with an adjoining glass sphere. Activities by day depend on the season. Go aurora spotting, ice fishing



and on a husky safari in winter and set out on horse rides and hiking excursions in summer before dining in the resort's restaurants — one with glass igloo bar — for a taste of Lapish cuisine; kakslauttanen.fi.



ANANTARA MEDJUMBE ISLAND RESORT, MOZAMBIQUE

The Quirimbas Archipelago off Mozambique's northern coast is renowned for its

rich marine life and diversity of coral, protected within the boundaries of Quirimbas National Park. Unbeknown to many, the islands are also regarded as a prime location for stargazing. The teardrop-shaped Medjumbe island and its Anantara resort are a short helicopter ride from the main isle, Pemba. Twelve eco-friendly oceanfront bungalows provide a base here for dolphin and whale watching, diving and relaxing by the pool by day, enjoying a private island picnic or dhow journey at sunset and marvelling at the constellations each night. For the ultimate al fresco view of our galaxy, the resort will set up a Bed of Stars (pictured), a cast-away four-poster bed positioned on the sand amid glowing lanterns; anantara.com.



andBEYOND SOSSUSVLEI DESERT LODGE, NAMIBIA

Sossusvlei, Namibia's most iconic landscape, is celebrated for its red sand dunes, the skeletons of camel thorn trees dotting the white clay pan, and some of the darkest skies on Earth. This desert lodge, which reopened after a complete rebuild at the end of last year, borders Africa's only Dark Sky Reserve. The property makes the most of this privileged location by hosting stargazing sessions in its state-of-the-art observatory and via skylights positioned above each of the beds in the 10 suites. The lodge's bold geometric structures of glass, rock and steel are designed to be as sustainable as possible, and

are furnished with the creations of local artisans. By day, the interiors frame the desert landscape and at night each suite's lap pool mirrors the stars; andbeyond.com.