

THE CREAM TRIP

By Sue Jackson

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At the sound of Captain Taira Peters' horn, Pepe, guardian of tiny Motukiekie in New Zealand's Bay of Islands raced to the end of the jetty and waved his paw in greeting. Those islanders sure are friendly. And with good reason; for over a century, boats have been their lifeline.

The Royal Mail, newspapers, coal, groceries, tools and cream cans - all of them had to be delivered by sea. And, whatever the weather, cream from the islands' dairy farms was collected for sale on the mainland.

When I discovered that the 'Cream Trip' still operates, I rushed to sign on. The prospect of meandering among the secluded islands, of meeting the islanders and learning about the Bay's history, not to mention seeing the dolphins who frequently escort the boats, was irresistible.

We joined the fifty or so other passengers, already aboard the Fullers cruiser, in the old port of Russell. This bewitching village, the base for the South Pacific whaling fleet in the 1830s and once dubbed the 'hell hole of the Pacific', is an historic jewel.

As instructed, we rugged up; it can be very cold out on the Bay. First stop: Moturoa Island, the second largest island in the Bay and still a working sheep farm. Moturoa has two very different claims to fame. It was the first place Captain Cook landed in New Zealand and he was so enchanted by it that he stayed ten days. And it was the scene of tragedy when the ships' provisioner, Mrs Robinson, and her children were

murdered by a disgruntled employee, who became the first person tried under British law after the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi.

Like many of the islands, Motuarohia, our next stop, has returned to its natural state, and is overseen by a care-taker, one Jim Cottier. As we pulled in to the jetty, we had a great view of the replica of a traditional sailing boat that Jim took seven years to complete using only old contemporary tools.

Jim's love of the sea goes way back. As he explained, since going to sea at fifteen, he has travelled more than a million kilometres across the world's oceans, sometimes in square-rigged ships. A career highlight was in 1987 when he skippered a Greenpeace vessel to Antarctica.

As Floppy Halliday, lover of dolphins and our tour guide extraordinaire, put it:

'The Bay's caretakers are a special breed. They are hard-working men who can turn their hand to anything. Some people would say it's a lonely life, but not everyone needs to be around people all the time.'

The Cream Trip's next port of call was Moturua island, which in Maori means 'to be loved or desired' – I bet there's a story there. Mollie, an Irish wolfhound, another grateful recipient of the biscuits the crew always carries for the Bay's dogs, patrolled the shore as we approached. Mollie loves to swim with the dolphins, but like us, had to content herself with merely watching Psycho, Spot, Trident and their pods frolic in the waves, because swimming with them is prohibited when the dolphins have new babies.

You have no doubt noticed by now that the names of some of the Bay's¹⁴⁴ islands can be confusing. Moturoa, Moturua, Motuarohia and even Motukiekie sound very alike, at least to the non-Maori ear.

Speaking of non-Maori ears, one highlight of the cruise was completely unexpected. I was chatting to Captain Peters when he asked if I'd like to hear a song. At my delighted assent, he proceeded to serenade me in his fine tenor voice with the famous Maori anthem 'Pokarekareana'. Unfortunately, this is a treat I can't guarantee on every trip.

After visiting Pepe and his owner, caretaker Pete Hunt, on Motukiekie, we pulled into Urupukapuka island, which at 520 acres is the largest in the Bay. We lunched there in the coastal reserve, enjoying its panoramic view of the Bay.

Urupukapuka is home to the Zane Grey restaurant and you can tie your boat up at Zane Grey dock. The famous American 'Western' writer was a passionate deep sea fisherman, and spent lots of time in New Zealand. In fact there are photos of him taken in the 1930s, dwarfed by huge fish he had landed, still displayed in Russell's intriguing Bay of Islands Swordfish Club.

Our last visit was to Piercy, named by Captain Cook after the First Lord of the Admiralty, and better known as the 'Hole in the Rock'. Boats often squeeze through this world-renowned 'doughnut hole', but on the day of our trip the sea was too rough. It was one experience I was happy to forgo.

Today's Cream Trip has none of the hardships of the original, when boats travelled over 100 kilometres during a gruelling 16-hour day collecting cans. These days, tiny farms are no longer economically viable, and there is no cream to collect.

But in other respects the link with the past is surprisingly intact. The islanders are still isolated, rely on boats for mail, supplies, emergency assistance and human contact. And just like all his predecessors, Pepe loves those biscuits.

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Boats depart Paihia and Russell, Bay of Islands, approximately 3 hours north of Auckland.

Several companies follow the cream trip route. Fullers acquired the original cream trip in 1927.

Fullers' cost for the day-long cruise is \$96 (adult) and \$48 (child), with an additional \$30 (refundable) to swim with the dolphins.

Only operates between October and April. Book ahead.