

NORTHLAND LIGHTS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN DOWNIE

Mangonui Harbour
Below: The Duke of Marlborough
Opposite: The Old Oak Hotel,
with the Acorn Bar
& Bistro next door



With its beaches, boutique accommodation, wineries, good food and laid-back locals, Northland offers a cosseting weekend, writes **Michael Hooper**





Mangonui Harbour

The warm weather in the Far North typically invites weekends away, even when much of New Zealand is digging out duvets. A salty soak or surf can be tempting in April, or even May, as the heat from summer is still blushing slowly from land to sea. And even when the season and the odd southerly are shaking awake the taniwha of Te Tai Tokerau, coastal havens like Mangonui and Russell call forth those city folk seeking a Saturday sleep-in sans lawnmower, and a Sunday replete with a long lunch, before journeying home for Monday's labours. Actually, can we make that Tuesday? It really takes a long weekend to savour the delightful languor of Northland.

The first stop on the green welcome carpet woven by Northland's subtropical climate is the award-winning Mahoe Cheese, on State Highway 10, near Kerikeri (mahoecheese.co.nz). Bob and Ann Rosevear and their extended family open their organic creamery most days - it pays to take take a chilly bin north. Fill it further with preserves and condiments from the shop at Ludbrook House (ludbrookhouse.co.nz) at Ohaeawai - try the pickled limes (winner of a *Cuisine* 2011 Artisan Award). Chilly bin now full, you'll be looking for a verandah with a sea view to relax and sample it all on, and here's where

The Old Oak Hotel (theoldoak.co.nz) at Mangonui comes in.

Proprietor Jean Gardner used to run a photographic agency in New York and LA, but after 23 years was looking for a less stressful lifestyle. In 2008, on a trip to New Zealand to seek business opportunities, she came across The Old Oak's site. "Design and architecture have always been a love of mine; my mom's a landscape designer and my family has always been involved in the arts," she says. "When I saw this decrepit building, I knew I could fix it up and it could be an absolute dream."

Indolence can be an industry in the north, so how did she pull together the rules and craftspeople necessary to restore the historic listed building (it was built in 1861)? "I hired the mayor." (His Worship, Wayne Brown, is also a consulting engineer.) The sympathetically redesigned and restored building opened late in 2009 - its original darkened wood floors and small-paned windows retained, with white walls bringing in light and air-con and en suite bathrooms providing a touch of luxury.

So far, the lifestyle suits Jean and her enthusiasm has not dulled. "I caught an 18lb kingfish on Wednesday night. High-five me!" she says. "Paddy at the pub smoked it for us; I looove good food."

We're staying in the upstairs Ponga

suite, where our verandah boasts views over the tidy gardens - Jean's partner, Gary Jones, looks after the herb and vegetable beds, along with the roses - and a pétanque court of crushed shells. Happily, our suite also comes with wine glasses and a generous fridge so we can stash our chilly-bin purchases.

The prolific peach tree raining fruit adjacent to the pétanque terrain soon grabs my attention, and before long our elbows are dripping with luscious juice. Appetites whetted, we head out in search of dinner, strolling past enticing aromas from the Thai Chef's restaurant and the conversational buzz of the Waterfront Café, before reaching the Mangonui Fish Shop, a legend in its own launch time. A bottle of Trinity Hill from the small but reasonable wine selection, some pre-packed salad and a smoked salmon entrée extends our bluenose and chips into a fully-fledged feast - and all for just \$47. Wooden picnic tables and squawking seagulls underscore the casual nature of dinner and, to our joy, nothing is overcooked and the batter is light.

Once back on our Old Oak balcony, the only bright lights in the bay are the zig-zag headlight pearls of two random flounder fishers. A Pinot Noir has found its way into the thirst aid bag, so we savour the serenity and talk.



The Old Oak Hotel owner, Jean Gardner, with partner Gary Jones and "hotel ambassador" Monster



Acorn Bar & Bistro's green-lipped mussels
Below: chef Grant Cantlay

Wooden tables and squawking seagulls underscore the casual nature of dinner



Four Square, Mangonui Harbour



AWAY WITH THE FAIRIES

Remember Dagwood sandwiches? The Mangonui Post Office café certainly does. We browse its range of retro Kiwiana crafts then, lattes in hand, head for the Peria Valley (also known as Honeymoon Valley) and Fern Flat.

En route, the gleaming peccs of would-be warriors and short-skirted wahine draw us to a halt: a group gathering to check out each other – and the passers-by – before leaping from the rocks into a deep, opal waterfall pool in the stream. It is a clip-art scene of Northland; Te Tai Tokerau at its wide-grinned best.

We later stop by the Bush Fairy Dairy, a café and grocery store some 30 dusty kilometres inland from the affluence of Coopers Beach. Started by 11 believers in the magic of macrobiotic food, local crafts, and community cooperation, this may be the store's final winter.

Beryl, one of the four helpers still there, often on a volunteer basis, sums it up. "We've been here nine years, so we've done pretty well. We've met some wonderful people and that's the beauty of the shop. We've created a community hub and it's been a positive experience – but there's a time for everything." With sad irony she observes it could be the decision to stop selling cigarettes that knells death for the dairy. It seems *not* smoking also kills.

Further exploration of the valley is rewarded with the discovery of two delightful potters' studios – Shepherd Road Pottery has attractively glazed and carefully thrown ornaments, platters and plates at bargain prices, while Fern Flat Pottery specialises in pieces with Maori and Pacific themes.

Back in Mangonui, a poster has appeared at the pub: "Bike and tattoo show: secret affairs, lingerie and accessories." Will Cheryl West be coming? We order ciders and are delighted to be offered complimentary smoked local fish, followed by a platter of gleaming, freshly-sliced sashimi. Has Jean been fishing again?

Beneath the old oak, for which the hotel is named, sits the Acorn Bar & Bistro, leased to Northland-born

Terry and his wife Cassandra Warin, latterly of Melbourne. Dinner shows the deft touch of returned local chef, Grant Cantlay. A caramelised-onion-and-three-cheese tart sits in a crisp, beautifully fine pastry case. Fresh snapper comes with bedfellows including perfectly blanched bright green beans, locally grown at Hihi, while coq au vin appears as a double breast of free-range chicken, cooked to moist perfection with shiitake mushrooms, smoky bacon, glazed shallots and crushed new potatoes. "It's bistro style," says Terry. "Good flavours and good value." No arguments there, with most mains coming in well under the \$30 mark.

With tourism seasonality in the north, Jean Gardner is under no illusions about the challenge ahead, but The Old Oak is responding well to its enthusiastic American-grown fertiliser. "I'll make it work, one way or another," she vows. "Working 24/7 has been some adjustment, but this has been a complete fairy tale for me. I still regularly pinch myself; I think I'm the luckiest girl on the planet!"

A GRAND OLD DUKE

As we head home, a cool oasis on the back road to Kerikeri beckons. Wharepuke subtropical gardens have sprouted a "rainforest" café – Food at Wharepuke (foodatwharepuke.co.nz) – that cares about cuisine, casual though it may be. Chef Colin Ashton can pick and choose from the organic produce in the gardens, and serves the lightest, most elegant spring rolls, along with wonderful salads composed of powerfully flavoured micro greens. While we eat, a guitarist provides subtle accompaniment.

We are called away by the Bay of Islands' Sunday farmers' market in Kerikeri (boifm.org.nz) – you need to be there before 11am to be rewarded with the full range of produce and added extras. Bags laden, we head for Russell. Locals in this historic hamlet are currently spoiled for choice, with three excellent restaurants and two cafés on the foreshore.

Less than a year after taking over the oldest licensed pub in the country (it opened back in 1827), two couples

have effectively redefined The Duke of Marlborough (theduke.co.nz). UK returnees Jayne Shirley and Riki Kinnaird, and ex-Pasha chef Anton Haagh and his wife Bridget have banished the sticky gaudiness of the old Duke, which was all too reminiscent of a Brighton lounge bar. In its place you'll now find simple chandeliers, elegantly attired walls, and comfortable lounges and dining furniture. The original large hotel kitchen has also had a makeover – now a modern, city-style facility, it's capable of producing the best. My only quibble is the new wrought iron tables and chairs on the verandah – it's amazing how much can fall through an open iron tabletop!

English chef Richard Donohue sees his menus as "a European take on Kiwiana". Kumara, hapuku and feijoas were on the menu when we visited, and the autumn menu will introduce game dishes, reinforcing an organic preference. The relative isolation of Russell, effectively an island, has nudged Richard to source seasonal, local ingredients.

"We've been constantly busy," says Jayne Shirley, "but we wouldn't have had it any other way!" In the hotel, a clever reconfiguration of interior spaces, white walls and streamlined suites has given breathing space for the weary traveller in a sympathetic restoration, similar to The Old Oak's. But it's the focus on service and atmosphere, including live music in summer and a planned winter seafood cooking school, that has helped speed the grand old Duke's march back up the hill of hospitality.

We eke out the last afternoon of our weekend enjoying a water ballet of boats in the bay – the tall ship *R Tucker Thomson* sails by; the little white ferry toots and gurgles its way to the wharf, sailboats crazily heel to round the marker right in front of us, the overnight cruisers *Ipipiri* and *Island Passage* cut gentle, distant wakes, and a pair of orange kayaks paddles past. On the mirror bay, a family of ducks is lined up in a row. Seems Northland is much the same.

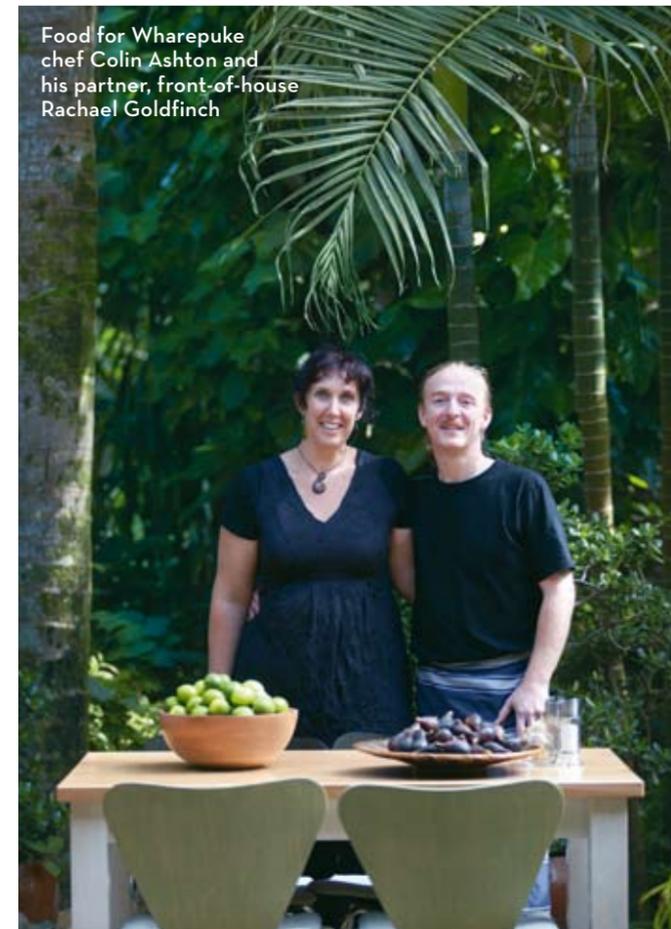
Now, about being back at work on Monday... ☘



The dining room at The Duke of Marlborough
Right: the view at The Duke



We eke out our last afternoon enjoying a water ballet of boats in the bay



Food for Wharepuke chef Colin Ashton and his partner, front-of-house Rachael Goldfinch



From left: The Duke of Marlborough's Kevin Lindo, head chef Richard Donohue and Shane Sneddon