



The 18 Whaka vineyard is one of 20 on the island. Jeff Thompson's "Fines" sculptures were in Sculpture on the Gulf 2007, abnormal exhibit on the island.

WAIHEKE UNCORRED

Pastoral and pinot just a ferry ride away from Auckland

By Stephanie Stephen

WAIHEKE ISLAND—The misty bright red sea-link ferry chugs along and I, unaccused in my tux and rakishly seaworthy Toyota, cross the Hauraki Gulf happily headed to Waikheke Island. Slightly sunnier and warmer, it's a part of Auckland City, but Waikeke's, as it was once known, sustains its own

of the coast of New Zealand's largest metropolis of 1.1 million people. I've driven on board for the 45-minute trip from Half Moon Bay wharf, about 20 minutes from the city in pursuit of my unimpeachable goal of seeing all of my adopted second home. It's a chance for a military weekend on the most populated and largest island among some 60 in the gulf. Sometimes called the Marlborough Vineyard of New Zealand, and almost like its own nation, this tiny haven is 12 miles long, six miles wide, and home to about 6,000 people. You can't ignore the grand and expensive properties—some vacation homes, some year-round—that dominate the pristine landscape. Here in New Zealand, the phrase "most populated" must be taken lightly; the country's total population is just over 4 million. A first-time visitor based in Auckland can do better than Waikheke to quickly get a feel for what New Zealand is like and to get out of town for a pastoral scene. Waikheke is a true microcosm of "Aotearoa," or "The Land of the Long White Cloud," the name be-



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An isle for wine and dining and wandering

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stowed on this country by its indigenous Maori people. Waikheke, which means "whaling or cascading waters," welcomes international visitors and Auckland wanderers with its picturesque coastline, serene, cloud-filled valleys and some, but not many, vineyards and forested white beaches framed in lava rock.

As the ferry reverses into an off-harbor dock of the harbor, I am off, headed to the steep hill on Donald Bruce Road on Kennedy Point. Here, I am struck by the endearingly low-rise stress pace of New Zealand life. I laugh at the road sign warning wanderers to take a shall path and "Slow Down, You're Here." A tight right into Kennedy Point Vineyards and I've unintentionally greeted by Susan McCarthy, a former American, who with her husband, Neil Kaituma, bought the property in 1994. The two oversee 12½ acres of vines that produce cabernet sauvignon, syrah, merlot, pinot noir, and several other varieties and are available to be sampled later at McCarthy's intimate Cedar & Pine Bar.

I deposit my belongings in the vineyard giftshop, where I'll have my own over-pastured cabernet robe in the middle of expansive proboscis trees that, when only red in bloom, resemble giant California beet beetles. Picking back the porch door, I board onto the deck to discover stunning views of the entire coastline. Rangitoto Island, just as evening shadows of the Southern Cross appear and a New Zealand wood pigeon, or koroa, whistles overhead.

As evening sets in, I enjoy this weekend, leaving me to keep myself company—until the vineyard lobby or stroll in for an authentic meal. The impressive choice of "relaxation" amenities include more than 40 known species and subspecies of coastal birds.

It's time for a drink, and Waikheke's "koroa," which is never too busy or intimidated, is an ideal venue on which to test nearby "whaling" wine skills. (Dionne Derris advises: "Keep your partner in the gutter, mate.") Along the way, I take obligatory



With its lush vineyards, Waikheke Island is sometimes referred to as the Marlborough Vineyard of New Zealand. Bordered from Auckland, on the North Island, less than an hour away, call this area the "bottom end" of the 12 by 6-mile Waikheke.

some detours, noting that the geography is loosely defined by small, beautiful bodies of water: Pukaki Bay, then Anzac Bay, along with Waikopua, Garden, Hoki, Owhiri, Chatham, Owhiri, and Church bays.

New Zealand has 600 vineyards, 30 on this island. Headrick Vineyard & Restaurant is a short trip—Be all those on Waikheke—along Church Bay Road for its classically designed structure, popular for events, set in formal gardens. Owner Nicholas Jones says the buildings are built of recycled power poles, whereas, and hand-knives and bottles.

Opt for feasting in the outdoor Potager Bistro instead of the high-collared main restaurant. My main course is slow-roasted turbot fillet, served with wild and garden herbs, salad, and a finish with a New Zealand cheese. Right next

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If you go . . .

How to get there Fly northeast, approximately 12-13 hours, from Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Vancouver, British Columbia, to Auckland on the North Island. To Waikheke, passengers only (no vehicles) take the ferry twice, 20 days a week, 01.64-9-367-9111, ferry.co.nz. To ferry your vehicle, drive to the Drive, Half Moon Bay, and use Southlink, 01.64-9-300-5900, saahk.co.nz, seven days.

What to do Connells Bay Sculpture Park, Caves Road, Connells Bay, 01.64-9-372-8957, connellsbay.co.nz. Beautiful coastal property dotted with sculpture. Mac O'Connor to mid-April by appointment only. Adults \$21, children under age 15 \$10. Reservations essential.

Orlando Market Orlando Memorial Hall, 01.64-9-372-5294, orlandomarket.co.nz. Colorful weekly Saturday market with a great atmosphere. Free.

Stony Bay Historic Reserve and Botanical Complex Garden Road, Waikheke Island, dc.govt.nz/whakarehua, 01.64-9-372-5294. National historic site. Free.

Whakarehua Island 21 Whaka Lane, 01.64-9-372-5248, whakarehua.co.nz. Beautiful garden, beach walk, art and sculpture.

Whakarehua Museum 2 Korua St., Orewa, 01.64-9-372-5757, musiack-dunedin.govt.nz. Instruments dating to the 1500s. Open daily; the Whittakers play at 1:30 p.m. every day except Mondays and Fridays.

Where to stay Connells Bay Cottage, 01.64-9-372-5600, connellsbaycottage.co.nz. One or two-bedroom villas or the whole three-bedroom house \$172-\$314.

Whakarehua Lodge 26 Whaka Lane, 01.64-9-372-2288, whakarehua.co.nz. One-bedroom guest rooms with private balcony. Doubles \$402, singles \$140, with transfer, breakfast, drink, breakfast. Dinner add-on.

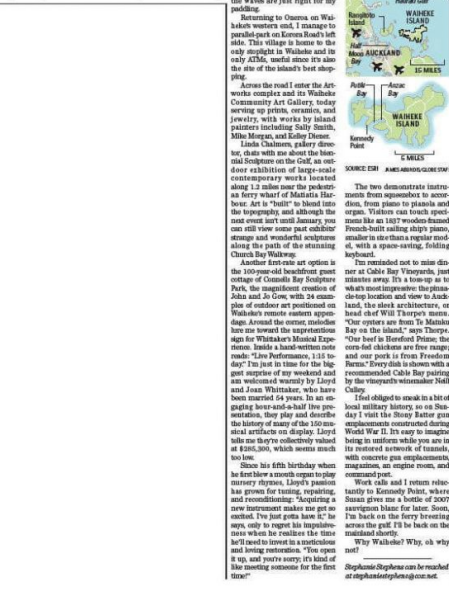
Whakarehua's Loft 27 Whakarehua Drive, 01.64-9-372-9344, whakarehua.co.nz. Historic inside Cable Bay Vineyard, lovely queen room, spacious dining lounge area, includes breakfast, bottle of wine. \$151, and \$14 additional for overnight stay.

Where to eat Connells Bay Vineyard, 01.64-9-372-5689, connellsbayvineyard.co.nz. Lunch 7 days; dinner Thursday, Saturday. Gorgeous views and food. Lunch \$25.

Madrick Vineyard & Restaurant Church Bay Road, 01.64-9-372-9050, madrick.co.nz. Brunch, classic wine, lunch, dinner 7 days. Dinner from \$25.

Whakarehua Botanical 218 Whaka Drive, 01.64-9-372-7191, whakarehua.co.nz. Contemporary art and architecture. Lunch, dinner daily, 10:30 a.m. please call. Dinner \$22-\$25.

Information www.motl.com, www.waikheke.com



MAP BY GUY LAWRENCE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE. AIR PHOTO: GUY LAWRENCE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE