



THE GOOD LIFE  
TRAVEL

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# Riding High

Gareth Eyres saddles up for a biking adventure on Northland's Twin Coast Cycle Trail.

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I'm sitting on a green-tiled concrete sofa in the main street of Kawakawa. Across the street is the so-called "World's Best Bathroom" – the Hundertwasser toilets, designed by Austrian architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, who was a local resident for 25 years.

A young girl is singing, perched on a low wall besides the funky toilet building. She's busking a cappella – no instruments or boom-box – just her clear voice ringing out in the warm morning air. Her koha can looks suspiciously like a large, repurposed dog food container. To my right is the bustling 39 Gillies St cafe, which sports a menu to rival any Ponsonby eatery. There's a pleasant pasifika vibe: te reo pop oozing over the sidewalk tables, happy people eating and strolling past.

To the visitor, Kawakawa is looking alright. It appears to have

had a perk-up from the grimy old junction town of the past.

I'm sitting on the tiled couch in my padded bike shorts, waiting for two things: my tray of coffee and goodies from 39 Gillies, and a ride to Kaikohe, which is the central point of the Twin Coast Cycle Trail.

The 87km cycle trail spans the Northland map in a zig-zag that connects Opuia in the Bay of Islands on the east coast to Horeke on the Hokianga Harbour in the west. From Opuia, it winds through Kawakawa, and around the back of Moerewa; then rises gently to the plateau where Kaikohe sits, about midway through the ride. The trail can be tackled in a number of ways. For those who like riding mainly on the flat or downhill, the Kaikohe start option, heading west or east, is the way to go. The farming service town is the highest community in Northland so, as they say, it's all

downhill from there. It's where we intend to hop on our bikes, first riding west for an overnight stay at the Horeke Hotel. In the morning we'll be shuttled back to Kaikohe (a half-hour drive) to cycle east to the Bay of Islands.

But first, we have to leave our vehicle at Kaikohe's Twin Coast Adventures Motel complex. A two-metre high steel gate rolls back to welcome us. It feels a bit fortress-like to the happy holidayers, but sensible if we're to leave our vehicle and belongings behind. Jade Wahiri is on the desk today, selling motel accommodation, bike hire and shuttle service. Jade's dad, Shane is owner of Twin Coast Adventures, and he's invested heavily in the cycle trail's promise of a tourism boom. Along with the spruced-up motel, he's purchased 100 Merida bikes and three shiny new LDV mini-coaches.

Four of us are riding on this

"winterless North" spring day; it's perfect weather for cycling. From Kaikohe to Okaihau we follow an old railway line. It's an easy, undulating 16km spin across fertile farmland. The trail is well-formed and gravelled. It was once also a well-used pathway for Maori sourcing eels from the Utakura stream, which we'll meet again further down the trail. At a layby stop there's track signage in English and te reo, advising that this is the site of the Rowsell timber mill, developed by two brothers in the 1930s to manage locally cut timber. They needed fast, efficient transport to get their weighty kauri logs to market, so rail was the obvious choice – and that's helped make this stretch of ride so smooth.

**FURTHER DOWN** the trail we come to a long, disused railway tunnel. There's a slight bend, which causes a bit of cussing

and nervous riding in the dark. And without flashlights, we can only imagine the wetas....

Okaihau is a quiet, one-street town. Important information for riders is it has clean, near-new toilet amenities at one end and a coffee shop with home-made pies dead-centre. The cafe is bustling with locals and cyclists. Staff from the nearby Northland Region Corrections Facility at Ngawha are having an off-site coffee meeting. As we leave, a trio of Auckland women get on their bikes at the same time. "Isn't this great?" they say. "Lovely weather and hardly anyone around." Yes, I think, the Twin Coast trail is still blissfully uncrowded and, for Aucklanders looking for a biking adventure, conveniently close to home.

We cycle out of Okaihau, past two pretty, well-maintained late-1800s churches. As we ride past bamboo-fringed paddocks with

their handsome Hereford steers, a flock of peacocks sprint for cover, fanning their turquoise-fringed tails as they run.

This is where the "fun descent" starts. The trail is crushed local bluestone and is dry and well-formed. It's a moderately steep downhill and a yellow sign warns cyclists to dismount. Dismount? And miss the fun of a 25kmh swoop through switchbacks on packed gravel? Seriously, if you can ride a bike reasonably well, this part of the trail is for you. Just ensure your brakes are up to spec, and you've got your turns sorted.

After two kilometres, the grade evens out and we roll into a grove of mature trees, then a stretch of track with a lovely, high-speed gradient. We fly alongside a stream and its attendant totara, before pedalling into a clearing with a strategically placed picnic table. We guzzle water





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and scoff fancy muesli bars. The Utakura Stream splashes busily downhill and two kereru swoop by, disturbed from their nikau roost.

It's a pleasant place to linger, but the promise of fresh snapper and a beer at sunset at the Horeke Hotel beckons. A 1.2km boardwalk-ride over mangrove flats tips four thirsty pedallers out at the colonial hotel overlooking the Hokianga Harbour headwaters. We're staying in one of the pub's over-water houses, where it's tempting to simply park yourself on the deck and watch the wildfowl in the estuary. Fourteen royal spoonbills have made their home here, roosting on a half-sunken log a stone's throw away from our perch. This colony is one of 19 in the country; these Australian migrants have found a muddy toehold on the intertidal flats of our harbours.

But little Horeke is big on history

and a nosey-around is required. It was New Zealand's first commercial ship-building yard, dating back to the late 1820s. The first government-funded hui was held here after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. More infamously, it's also the site of the country's first pub and its first murder trial in the late 1830s – despite “the court” having no legal jurisdiction at that time. Horeke's historical and architectural gem is the elegant Mangungu Mission House, overlooking the tranquil harbour. It was completed in 1839, making it one of Northland's oldest buildings. The chapel alongside is the old Methodist church from Kohukohu, which was shifted across the water to Mangungu. Inside the mission house, you can see the original table on which the treaty was signed – then wander through the historic cemetery. We're in the

heart of the Hokianga, and there's a palpable sense of whakapapa.

Back at the hotel, we enjoy a hearty meal of local snapper and a good night's sleep, listening to the tide suck in and out beneath our floorboards. In the morning, we get a ride back to Kaikohe with Horeke pub owner Peter Maddren, passing a busy sportsfield and a young family selling “Hot Hangi, \$5” out of the rear of their silver hatchback.

Back in our saddles, we learn there's been a slip that will prevent us completing the final stretch to Opuia. But there's plenty to see before we hit our foreshortened end of the trail: we pass the airfield that the Americans built for their bombers in World War II; cross two renovated suspension bridges; we weave past mangrove swamps and farmland, also – reflecting another side of Northland – a



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fair few rusting car carcasses in the backs of people's yards. From Kawakawa we hit another disused rail corridor and an 80m tunnel offering suitably spooky thrills. For a stretch we cycle alongside restored track – the hard work of the Bay of Islands Vintage Railway, which schedules Friday to Sunday train rides. They're currently pulled by vintage diesel engines, while the trust's 1927 steam-engine star attraction, Gabriel, gets a new boiler.

It's a fitting "vintage" end to our adventure. As Kiwi cycling guru Jonathan Kennett says. "The Twin Coast is at the historical heart of Aotearoa New Zealand...it will stay with you long after you've finished the ride."

## TO DO

### Cycling North

Experience Pou Herenga Tai: the Twin Coast Cycle Trail now – before the hordes arrive! See [twincoastcycletrail.kiwi.nz](http://twincoastcycletrail.kiwi.nz) for a comprehensive guide on logistics

*for your ride. A number of companies offer bike hire, shuttles and even guided rides.*

**IF YOU WANT** more, the Waitangi Mountain Bike Park, just out of Paihia, is a blast and worth an extra day in the North. There are more 30 trails on 42km of track. There are levels of difficulty, and the similarity to the Rotorua trails is evident; they were designed by the same folk, Southstar trails. As one muddy, happy rider pronounced as he wheeled into the car park: "That's the best ride north of Auckland. Totally awesome." 33 Bayly Rd, Waitangi, [wmbp.nz](http://wmbp.nz)

### Waiariki Hot Springs and Ngawha Spa

The therapeutic properties of these pools are perfect for the saddle-sore and you can't argue about the price: adults \$4, children \$1-2; open seven days, 9am- 9pm. From

Kaikohe, you need your own transport or organise a shuttle. Ngawha Springs Rd, Ngawha, ph (09) 405-2245, [ngawhasprings.co.nz](http://ngawhasprings.co.nz)

## TO STAY

Check the Twin Coast Cycle Trail website for accommodation options along the trail; they range from hotels and motels to farm-stays and "eco-pods". You'll have plenty of accommodation choices at the Bay of Islands end of the trail. Paihia is just 5km from the Opua trail-head. (We stayed at Admirals View Lodge, handy to the waterfront and local eateries; 2 MacMurray Rd, Paihia, ph (09) 402-6236, [admiralsviewlodge.co.nz](http://admiralsviewlodge.co.nz).) You can also make Kaikohe your base; and there's limited but interesting accommodation at Horeke. *We stayed – and ate well – at the Horeke Hotel, 2118 Horeke Rd, Hokianga Harbour, ph (09) 401-9133, [horekehotel.nz](http://horekehotel.nz).*