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Drive Time

Whangarei

surprise



Town Basin

Patrick Smith finds hospitality, art, great scenery and killer prawns on a Northland weekend.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON AND IT'S RAINING. IT WASN'T RAINING THIS MORNING BUT THAT WAS JUST A TEASE: THE WEATHER KNEW I'D BOOKED A WEEKEND UP NORTH AND COULD DO AS IT PLEASED.

On the road to Whangarei, southbound trucks toss blinding sheets of water across the windscreen of the Toyota rental. It's a drive I've always enjoyed, but today I just want to get there. The toll road is \$2 well spent.

At Whangarei I find the Tutukaka road and head for Glenbervie, about 10km from town, a pretty place of orchards and old stone walls. I'm staying here, at Lupton Lodge, an historic villa owned by Andy and Karen Lee.

The lodge is halfway between Whangarei and Tutukaka and close enough to attract both weekday business folk and weekend divers and surfers.

It has three guest rooms. Karen shows me to the Red Room at the front of the

house, a large suite with polished kauri floors and deep-red walls. A large flat-screen TV and DVD player sit on a leather-topped desk. The king-size bed looks inviting, as does the leather couch. There's a dressing room and an ensuite bathroom. A heat pump is doing a good job. Perfect.

Elsewhere in the house is a large kitchen where Andy makes breakfasts and pre-arranged dinners, a cosy sitting room and a breakfast room. A few steps away is a separate games room with a well-patronised pool table. There's a pretty garden and a 10-metre swimming pool.

A cup of tea, a shower and a brief lie-down and it's time to head back into Whangarei for dinner at à Deco, an award-



Tutukaka Marina



Whangarei Falls



Killer Prawn Restaurant & Bar



A.H. Reed Kauri Park boardwalk

winning restaurant housed in an art deco house on Kamo Rd. It was recommended as the town's top fine-dining experience – indeed, Cuisine magazine said it set “a new standard for North Island destination dining”.

The setting is lovely: polished floors with deco rugs, chrome-and-white deco details and porthole windows providing a glimpse of the cooks at work in the kitchen.

Chef-owner Brenton Low makes sure the food is pretty special, too, with an inventive menu using fresh seasonal produce. You can go for the five-course tasting menu or choose à la carte, as I do: an entrée of poached local white fish wonton with Northland paua and smoked eel,

followed by roasted duck-breast mignons. I resist the tempting desserts.

All this gets my Whangarei weekend off to a promising start and next morning I'm ready to see what other delights await when my friend Murray, Whangarei born and bred, calls to pick me up. It's stopped raining and we drive out to the coast – Ngunguru, Tutukaka, Matapouri and finally Sandy Bay. From here you can loop back to Whangarei via Hikurangi, but we linger on the beach and then drive back down Woolleys Bay and stroll out to rocky Whale Bay, a good fishing spot, Murray tells me.

On the way back to Tutukaka, we stop at Tawapou, a native plant nursery and

gardens run by Guy and Sandra Bowden. It's a fabulous place to shop for natives, and fun, too, because Guy is also an imaginative artist and his beautifully worked creations – eels, fish and the occasional person – peer out from among plants and bush.

We reach Tutukaka at lunchtime and make for the marina and Schnappa Rock, an iconic restaurant and bar run by Nick Keane and Esther Eves, who took it over five years ago and have added a Pacific tone to both décor and menu. We hoe into plump green-lipped mussels in a chilli and lemongrass liquor and pan-fried snapper.

On the way back to town we drop in to Glenberrie Pottery Gallery, where

“No visit to Whangarei would be complete without seeing the photogenic Whangarei Falls, which tumble 26m into a swimming hole about 5km north-east of town.”

sculptor Jin Ling and ceramic artist Greg Baron live and work in an earth-built house, studio and gallery. Jin Ling's serene figures dot the grounds, while Greg's finely wrought stone and porcelain pots fill the gallery.

No visit to Whangarei would be complete without seeing the photogenic Whangarei Falls, which tumble 26m into a swimming hole about 5km north-east of town. There's a walkway that takes you all the way to the Town Basin, which is where we're headed, though not on foot.

The Town Basin is a pleasant riverside precinct of shops, galleries and cafés by the marina. We watch glass-blowing in Burning Issues Gallery, filled with colourful works by Northland artists. We check out the Whangarei Art Museum. At the Annie Rose Gallery people are learning to make glass beads.

That night I meet Murray and his wife Jan for dinner at Killer Prawn, a restaurant and bar run by Dave Sinclair, who purpose-built this hugely popular

eatery on Whangarei's main street. The secret of Killer Prawn's success seems to be fresh ingredients well cooked, presented and professionally served in a relaxed setting and at a reasonable price. Upstairs, cosy Killer Pizza serves generous wood-fired pizzas on Friday and Saturday nights.

At our table near the open fire, we share plates of tempura prawns and fresh oysters, then I go for a juicy eye fillet steak with a mushroom sauce. Dave's signature dish is prawns in a spicy tomato and rosemary broth served with chunky bread for dipping – and a bib. It's called, naturally, Killer Prawn.

Next morning I visit the A.H. Reed Kauri Park, where there's a waterfall and a canopy boardwalk that takes me past majestic 500-year-old forest giants.

Cont ...

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Claphams Clocks



Lupton Lodge

I also want to see Northland sculptor Chris Booth's big stone installation Waka & Wave at the entrance to the Town Basin. It's an impressive work signifying "arrivals and departures".

My last stop before I head home is Claphams Clocks, the National Clock Museum, in the Town Basin. It's intriguing: 1,400 timepieces – the oldest made in 1720 – everything from water clocks to novelty Kiwiana. Take the guided tour, you'll love it.

On the way south, I turn off SH1 at Waipu towards the coast: Waipu Cove, Langs Beach, Mangawhai – where I duck into the Smashed Pipi Gallery – rejoining SH1 at Kaiwaka. Here I grab a coffee at Café Eutopia, where a New Age vibe persists within a funky, fantastical setting. Surprise upon surprise. ■

Fact File

Getting There

Whangarei is a bit over two hours' drive north of Auckland on State Highway 1.

Stay

Lupton Lodge, Glenbervie.
Ph. (09) 437 2989;
www.luptonlodge.co.nz

Eat

À Deco, 70 Kamo Rd.
Ph. (09) 459 4957; <http://a-deco.co.nz>
Killer Prawn, 26-28 Bank St.
Ph. (09) 433 333; www.killerprawn.co.nz
Schnappa Rock, Tutukaka.
Ph. (09) 434 3774;
www.schnapparock.co.nz

More Info

Whangarei i-Site Visitor Centre,
92 Otaika Rd. Ph. (09) 438 2943;
www.whangareinz.com
www.northlandnz.com

Links

www.tawapou.co.nz
www.glenberviepottery.co.nz
www.burningissuesgallery.co.nz
www.annierose.com
www.whangareiarthemuseum.co.nz
www.claphamsclocks.com



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