

# WHERE WALLS TURN INTO WAVES

WITH ITS VIBRANT CULTURAL SCENE,  
BEAUTIFUL COASTAL SCENERY AND  
GLORIOUS PARKS AND GARDENS,  
THE NEW ZEALAND CITY OF  
NEW PLYMOUTH DOES  
NOT DISAPPOINT...

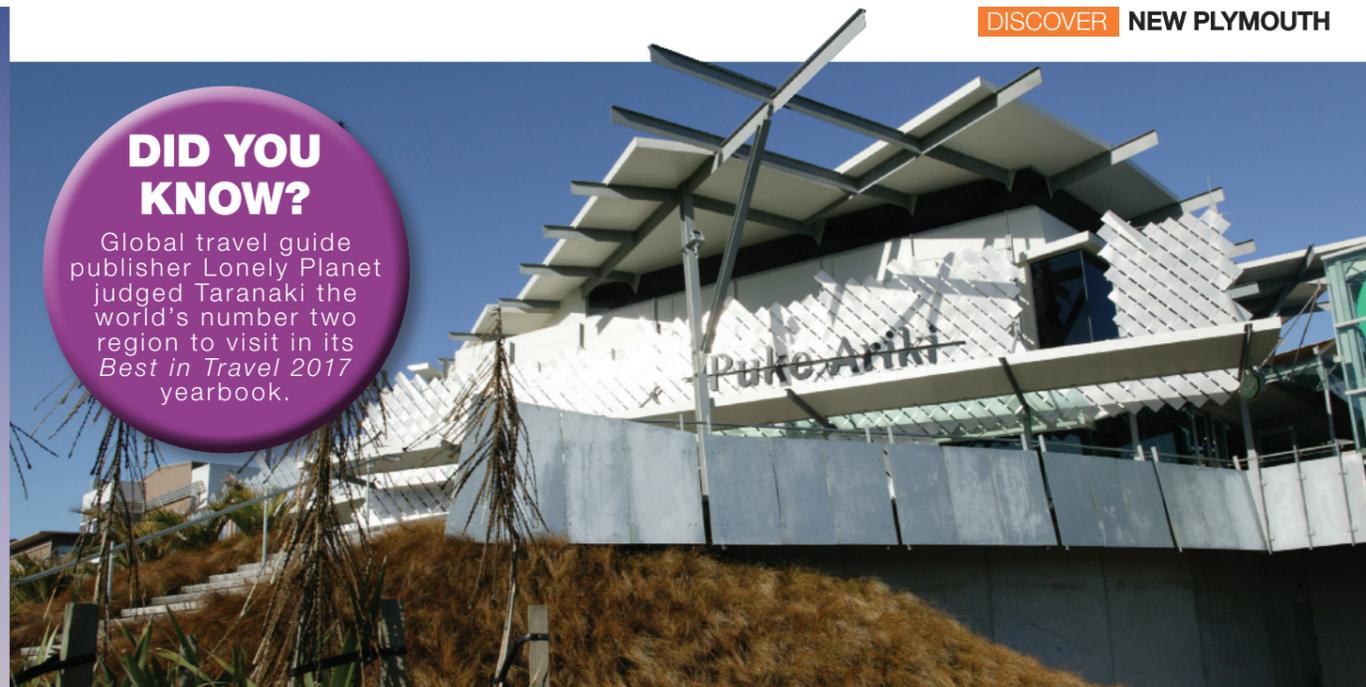
WORDS: Wibke Carter

A small confession first: I am married to a Kiwi, who is from New Plymouth, and he wants to retire there. Nearly 10 years ago, my husband took me to his hometown, and showed me the best of everything on offer, but I simply could not see myself moving there. Fast forward to 2017, we're back again, and this time it is a whole new experience as New Plymouth has seen an astonishing development unlike any other place in New Zealand.

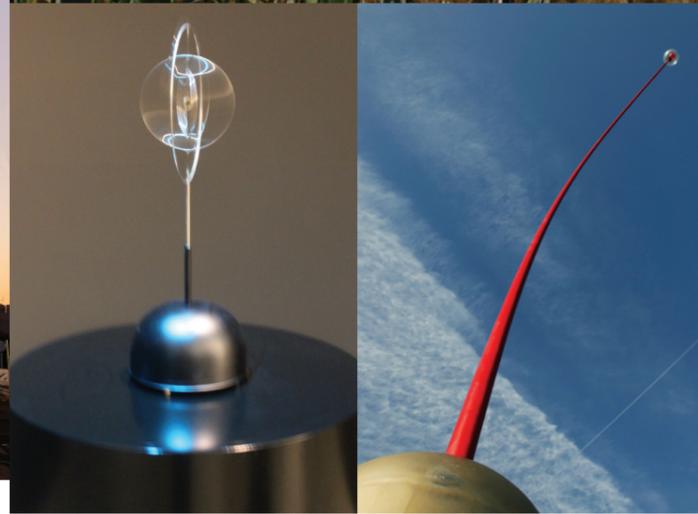
"The opening of the Len Lye Centre in July 2015 was only the icing on the cake of the transformation the city has undergone in the last decade," says Antony Rhodes from Venture Taranaki, the tourism organisation of the wider region of which New

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Main image: The Te Rewa Rewa Bridge, with Mount Taranaki beyond



**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Global travel guide publisher Lonely Planet judged Taranaki the world's number two region to visit in its *Best in Travel 2017* yearbook.



**Above:** The facade of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Len Lye Centre

**Left:** A moa skeleton inside the Puke Ariki museum

Plymouth is the capital. “Our town has always been a domestic insider tip for surfers and garden lovers, but the centre, the award-winning Puke Ariki museum and the Coastal Walkway have now put New Plymouth firmly on the map for international visitors as well. In fact, we have seen a more than 20 per cent increase in the last year.”

**STIMULATING ART**

Having heard and read so much about the new museum and gallery honouring the pioneering filmmaker and kinetic sculptor Len Lye, I am attracted, as if pulled by an invisible hand, to New Plymouth’s most recognizable building.

An extension of the internationally acclaimed, contemporary Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, and sitting prominently on a slight rise just off the main shopping street, there is no missing the Len Lye Centre with its imposing façade finished in highly polished stainless steel and concrete.

All around, just like me, visitors struggle to get the perfect shot, or selfie, of the waves of mirrored curved panels that create an ever-changing reflection of light and movement. Walking inside I am struck by the tall,

more than 10 metre-high, concrete walls to the left-hand side of the entrance and gentle noises in the distance lure me to walk on.

The globally significant Len Lye collection and archive comprises of more than 18,000 items of which many paintings, writings, films and photography are on display. I am particularly fascinated by the kinetic sculptures made of steel springs, rods and bands.

**Clockwise from top left:** Puke Ariki library and museum on the waterfront; artwork among the fernery at Pukekura Park; the Len Lye Wind Wand sculpture; the “Roundhead” sculpture by Len Lye

“Mirrored curved panels create an ever-changing reflection of light and movement...”

For one sculpture, Roundhead, Lye even used his second wife, Ann’s, wedding band as the innermost of the four rings. Fitted with different mechanisms, the sculptures swirl, vibrate, shudder and sway into various figures and patterns of movement under coloured lighting and accompanied by carefully selected soundtracks. I could get lost in this kaleidoscope of sensual stimulation for hours and it is easy to see why

Len Lye was considered worthy of New Zealand’s first institution dedicated to a single artist.

Leaving the Len Lye Centre in a daze, I continue to Puke Ariki, a white steel, metal, glass and concrete extravaganza which houses the world’s first purpose-built, fully integrated museum, library and visitor information centre.

Four permanent exhibitions cover Taranaki’s natural, geological and human history from the earliest Maori settlements to the unique flightless birds that roam New Zealand’s forests. On the lower ground level temporary exhibitions are staged and just my luck, during my visit, “Bugs – Our Backyard Heroes” is on. I cannot stifle a small moan of disgust at the sight of live weta, crickets, cockroaches and Eugene, the giant poisonous centipede, in glass containers, but children love it, a staff member assures me.

**COASTAL WALKWAY**

Part of the Puke Ariki complex is Arborio, one of New Plymouth’s best restaurants – perfect for a lunch with family members. “How’s your day going?” my husband enquires over New Zealand green lip mussels steamed in a white wine. “Fine”, I answer coyly, not >>>

wanting to reveal that I've been blown away by my experience already. The fantastic sea views from Arborio to the waterfront and the innovative cuisine only add to that.

To walk off lunch and get some fresh air after the gallery and museums visits, I hit the expansive sea-edge promenade and set foot on the award-winning Coastal Walkway. Swaying opposite Puke Ariki is Len Lye's outdoor artwork *Wind Wand*.

Measuring 48 metres in height and made of red fibreglass, the kinetic sculpture was installed in 1999 and is one of the icons of New Plymouth. Like so many of Lye's creations, the *Wind Wand* is "alive": lighting up during the night and bending in high winds. Several other public artworks also adorn the waterfront.

New Plymouth's Coastal Walkway is 13 kilometres long and runs from Ngamotu Beach to Bell Block or vice versa. As a pedestrian, the whole walk would take around three to four hours but access points to shorten the experience are aplenty.

Parts of the walkway, notable for the use of robust materials with strong lines and textures to stand up to and reflect upon the character of the west coast, have been open since 2001. However, it was not until the

**Right (from top to bottom):** A fish pond and fernery in Pukekura Park; Ngamotu Beach; the New Plymouth Coastal Walkway and Te Henui stream; the Coastal Walkway



“ I hit the expansive promenade and set foot on the award-winning Coastal Walkway... ”

construction of the iconic Te Rewa Rewa Bridge and the final extension from the Waiwhakaiho River mouth to Hickford Park in 2010 that the walkway became a visitor's favourite.

Surrounded by runners, rollerbladers, cyclists and skaters of all ages, a fresh breeze tousles my hair. To the left lies the grey-blueish Pacific Ocean sending crashing white waves to shore and to the right towers the snow-capped, near perfect volcanic cone of Mount Taranaki.

Crossing the Te Henui stream and passing Fitzroy Beach, one of the area's many black sand beaches, I reach Te Rewa Rewa Bridge after an hour's walk.

Approaching it via the walkway from the side, the beauty of its form, reminiscent of both a breaking wave and whale skeleton, does not become apparent until I stand right in front of it.

After walking through the tied arch bridge, I turn around and see the majestic Mount Taranaki through the "ribs", fully comprehending the architect's intention to represent the sacred relationship between the land, sea and wind with the Ngati Tawhirikura tribe as the different design element perfectly complement each other.

The next morning, I join a walking tour of historical New Plymouth, guided by Mike Nightingale, a retired teacher and local resident here since 1974. >>



**Clockwise from right:** The Bell Tower; the marine-rich Sugar Loaf islands; sunset at Fitzroy Beach

## MARINE LIFE HAVEN

The Sugar Loaf Islands are the remnants of an ancient volcano...



Around 0.6 miles offshore from New Plymouth are the remnants of an ancient volcano much older than Mount Taranaki. Formed 1.75 million years ago, soft rock has long since been eroded away, giving way to a group of seven islands above water and spectacular cliffs, canyons, boulder reefs, pinnacles and sand expanses below the surface. Captain James Cook named the islands after the lumps of sugar loaf he put in his tea.

The underwater world of the Sugar Loaf Islands is a popular diving spot and home to at least 89 species of fish, 33 species of encrusting sponges, 28 species of bryozoans and nine nudibranchs. The islands, both above and below water, have been protected since 1986, thus ensuring the safety of 400 breeding fur seals and 19 species of seabirds as well as migrating dolphins and whales.

Charter companies tour the Sugar Loaf Islands, and there are diving operators who can give access to the underwater sights. The best times for diving are summer and autumn when underwater visibility can reach up to 20 metres.





The city is visibly marked by its English heritage like most of New Zealand. Originally called Ngamotu (the islands) by the local Maori, it was not until 1841–42 when planned settlement by the Plymouth Company brought 868 immigrants from Devon and Cornwall to the ‘New’ Plymouth.

Soon after, a war broke out between Pakeha (non-Maori) and Maori over a proposed land sale at nearby Waitara resulting in a decade of conflict. New Plymouth’s population fell dramatically from 2,944 in 1864 to 1,837 in 1871.

“Most people died because of poor hygienic conditions, not the conflict itself,” explains Nightingale as we stroll along historical sights like Richmond Cottage, Marsland Hill and Alpha Mill.

Time flies as he recalls stories like that of Reverend Bollard who insisted the Cathedral Church of St Mary was built in stone rather than wood (“Only the best is good enough for God”).

## MAGICAL GARDENS

The most vivid memory from my inaugural visit to New Plymouth is the Festival of Lights at Pukekura Park. Walking at night through a beautifully illuminated botanical garden, surrounded by light installations and artists’ performances, was something truly magical.

Time to figure out if the park could live up to its reputation as one of the best in the country at daytime. “When we were children, my friends and I used to get lost in Pukekura,” recalls local Danny Robbie, when I ask for the best way to approach the park. Evidently, at 52 hectares, with a diverse range of landscapes including formal gardens, lakes and walking trails, it is rather huge.

Luckily, plenty of maps and signs help the lost wanderer. I stroll from the Fountain Lake to the

**Above (from left to right):** a snow-capped Mount Taranaki looms over the city; historic Richmond Cottage; Fountain Lake at Pukekura Park

## USEFUL CONTACTS

- Venture Taranaki: [www.visit.taranaki.info](http://www.visit.taranaki.info)
- Len Lye Centre: [govettbrewster.com/visit/tours](http://govettbrewster.com/visit/tours)
- Puke Ariki Historical Walks: [visitnewplymouth.nz](http://visitnewplymouth.nz)
- Puke Ariki: [pukeariki.com](http://pukeariki.com)
- Arboria Restaurant: [www.arborio.co.nz](http://www.arborio.co.nz)
- Festival of Lights: [www.festivaloflights.nz](http://www.festivaloflights.nz)
- Pukekura Park: [www.pukekura.org.nz](http://www.pukekura.org.nz)

“I stroll from the Fountain Lake to the Mishima Gate, a traditional red Japanese torii gate”

Mishima Gate, a traditional red Japanese torii gate before reaching the main lake.

From the pier at the recently refurbished Teahouse on the Lake, I can see Mount Taranaki surrounded by clouds above the red Poet’s Bridge from 1884.

I continue around the lake through a medley of exotic flowers, foreign tree specimen and native bush. It is so quiet at times, it is hard to imagine I am in the middle of a city with nearly 70,000 people.

On the evening before our departure, my husband and I are meeting friends who moved to New Plymouth a few years ago. Having lived in other major cities throughout New Zealand, they feel at home here.

“It really was a lifestyle choice for us,” say Angus and Natalie McLeod. “The houses are still affordable, we commute 15 minutes to work and are spoilt for outdoor choices between beach and mountain.”

My better half winks at me. “How about New Plymouth now?” he asks. “Okay, okay,” I laugh. “I’m in!” 