

A clear view of Mount Taranaki is a highlight of the Pouakai Crossing day hike.

The Sleeping Giant Awakes

Once overlooked, New Zealand's Taranaki is finally getting its due for its picture-perfect volcano, gardens and world-class art

by WIBKE CARTER

THERE'S A SAYING ABOUT NEW ZEALAND'S Mount Taranaki: "If you can't see the mountain, it's raining. And if you can see the mountain, it's about to rain."

Indeed, as I learned during my stay in the Taranaki region, its main attraction can be a bit, well ... unpredictable.

I had traveled from Auckland to New Plymouth, a town of about 70,000 people on the west coast of the country's North Island, to hike the new Pouakai Crossing. The eight-to-nine-hour hike is hailed as a less-crowded alternative to the country's popular Tongariro Crossing. Also among the trek's highlights are views of Mount Taranaki, the active volcano that gained worldwide fame as a stand-in for Japan's Mount Fuji in the blockbuster flick "The Last Samurai," starring Tom Cruise.

"We were voted the world's second-best region to visit in 2017 by *Lonely Planet*," said Antony Rhodes, communications manager for Venture Taranaki, the local tourism organization. "The region has always been a domestic insider tip for surfers and garden lovers, but now we've seen more than a 20 percent increase in international visitors in the last year."

Easily accessible by a 50-minute plane ride

with Air New Zealand from Auckland, this once sleepy coastal region with around 108,000 locals is bracing itself for an influx of travelers. The recently opened four-star, 85-room Novotel New Plymouth Hobson added much-needed capacity.

In hopes of sunnier skies, I postponed my Pouakai Crossing trek until my last day in the region. Fortunately, there were plenty of other

adventures to be had — both indoors and out.

Called the Garden of New Zealand,

Taranaki offers a temperate climate with abundant rainfall and many hours of sunshine,

making it green, lush and fertile. Nature lovers won't want to miss Te Kainga Marire, considered a Garden of International Significance by New Zealand Gardens Trust. Guided tours and tastings of native produce are on offer for those

ART AND ADVENTURE

If waiting for ideal weather, head to Len Lye Centre.



who wish to see endemic ferns, wetland plants and native trees.

And even the most outdoorsy travelers should take a stretching break at Len Lye Centre. Opened in 2015, Len Lye is New Zealand's only museum of contemporary art and New Plymouth's most recognizable building. Outside, visitors struggle to get the perfect shot of the stainless-steel waves that create an ever-changing reflection of light and movement. Inside, sculptures swirl, vibrate, shudder and sway into figures and patterns of movement, best experienced on a guided gallery and exhibition tour.

Leaving Len Lye Centre in a daze, I continued to Puke Ariki, a white steel, metal, glass and concrete extravaganza that houses the local museum. Four permanent exhibitions cover Taranaki's natural, geological and

human history, from the earliest Maori settlements to the flightless birds that roam New Zealand's forests. Additionally, Puke Ariki also offers commissionable historical walks around the city's central business district.

For some post-museum fresh air — and to warm up for my hike around Mount Taranaki — I set foot on the award-winning 8-mile Coastal Walkway. A fresh breeze tousled my hair while the grayish-blue Pacific Ocean sent crashing white waves to shore, and runners, cyclists and skaters surrounded me. After an hour, I reached the iconic Te Rewa Rewa Bridge, which is reminiscent of both a breaking wave and a whale skeleton.

After putting off the inevitable, I tackled Pouakai Crossing in wet-weather gear. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but it turned out to be a strenuous hike. Beautiful and everchanging,

the hike took me through different vegetation, from rainforest to shrubs above the tree line.

On my last look at snowcapped, majestic Mount Taranaki, I couldn't help but agree with Tom Cruise who, when shooting "The Last Samurai," commented on its breathtaking beauty. He asked, "How could anyone not want to be here?" **X**

The Details: Venture Taranaki (www.visit.taranaki.info)

BOOKING TIPS

Consider Top Guides for hikes and Back 2 the Wild for mountain bike trips on and around Mount Taranaki. Planning a spare, bad weather day is advisable. www.back2thewild.co.nz, www.topguides.co.nz



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