

A CRIMSON Christmas



Cindy McQuade discovers pohutukawa are the symbol of Santa, snarlers and summers with the family.

The flowers of pohutukawa smearing crimson across the land is one of our most palpable summer symbols. It signals time to get out the jandals, T-shirts and snarlers for the barbie. For most of us, it also symbolises Christmas and time to be with family. If you are Kiwi in a foreign land at this time of year, an image of the pohutukawa guarantees to wrench the heart like no other.

This tree, and its scarlet flower, has become enmeshed in the Kiwi psyche since the first European settlers adopted it as their Christmas tree in the 19th century.

Now is the time to admire the pohutukawa in all its gnarled and fiery glory and one of the best places to enjoy them is north of Waihi Beach.

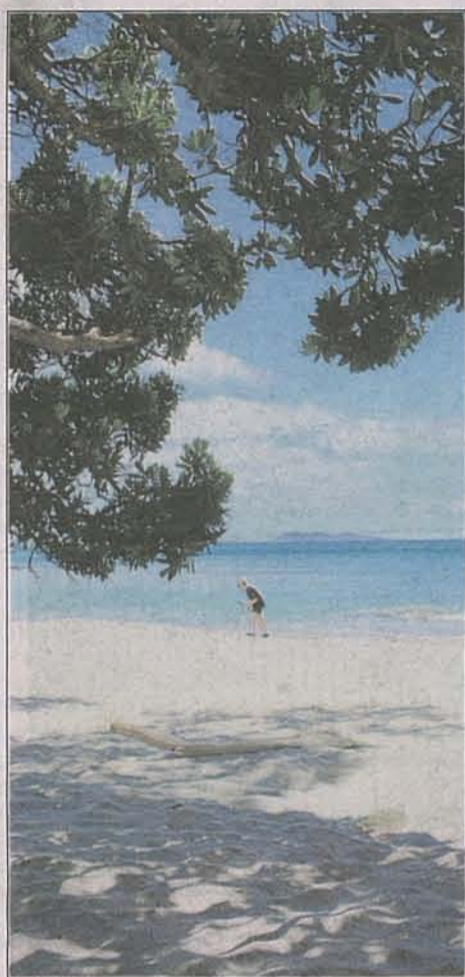
Take a hike from the northern end of the beach over to Orokawa Bay and you will be walking among 400-year-old whoppers. Pohutukawa can live up to 1000 years and on this walk you will see their giant limbs stretching up to the sky, reaching out over the cliffs, announcing that this is their time to glory.

The clay track to Orokawa Bay skirts along the headland and in some places drops steeply down to

the coast. The views are stunning out to Tuhua (Mayor) Island as the turquoise blue of the water and the cyan sky become one glorious backdrop to the gnarled trees.

The walk over to the bay only takes 45 minutes one way, and the track curls into plenty of shaded areas nursing groves of large nikau. This is original bush and the 145 hectares of DoC-managed scenic reserve is in full blush with not only showy pohutukawa, but also their myrtle cousins, manuka, casting a

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TAKE A HIKE: The track offers spectacular views and turquoise water to bathe in.

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frosting of flowers among the sub-tropical foliage.

Also dotted along the track are rare shrubs grown only in Northland and the Bay of Plenty/Coromandel area. It's important to stick to the track and leave dogs at home as these precious plants can be damaged.

At this time of year, you can

hear happy tui singing in the branches. It's a relief to hear some parts of our native bush still have birdlife.

It didn't take long to get to the stark white sands of Orokawa Bay which are isolated compared with nearby Waihi Beach.

We came across a couple of teenagers in the water with parents keeping a close eye on

their watery pursuits. It's not the best beach to have a swim, particularly for little kids, as the beach has a steep drop-off.

Perfect for surfeasting though. Take your tackle box; the rocks at the end of the beach are a fishing mecca.

There's no need to bring sunshades or any such paraphernalia, the giant pohutukawa lining the entire

beach are the perfect sunshade. A day spent here reading a book, having a picnic, and getting away from the action at busier beaches is the perfect way to wind down after the hectic Christmas preparations.

If you're in the mood for more activity though, the track continues along the northern end of the beach. From here you can take another walk over the

Get there:

From Tauranga: Head out of town on SH2, turn right on to Athenree Rd, continue on to Steele Rd which becomes Emerton Rd. At the roundabout turn left into Seaforth Rd which then turns into Wilson Rd. At the roundabout, turn right into Beach Rd. Turn right at the roundabout and you will reach The Esplanade. The track to Orokawa Bay is at the end of the beach.

Virtually on Track Fact File:

Discover, Explore, Connect **Waihi Beach and Bowentown**

Walking, running, kayaking, geocaching, mountain biking, stand up paddling

Waihi Beach 9km of golden sands, Bowentown Heads and Anzac Bay

Nearby is Athenree wetlands — currently being restored to its natural state

Orokawa Bay

Walking, running, geocaching

145ha scenic reserve

Bush and coastal walkway from Waihi Beach to Orokawa Bay and on to Homunga Bay

Black Hill Mountain Bike Park

Two trails — yellow and pink

11km of trail

Visit

www.virtuallyontrack.co.nz for more info on this local gem and others across the Bay of Plenty.

Orokawa Stream, crossing to the William Wright Falls. This is a gorgeous inland bush walk to the 30-metre high falls and well worth the extra 40-minute return walk.

You can also head along the northern headlands of Orokawa Bay to Homunga Bay. This is a further two-hour walk one way and a swim will be a necessity if it's a scorcher. This beach is also another fishing hotspot.

The isolation of these gorgeous bays are the flip side of Waihi Beach in full festive swing. However, our seaside towns are a bit like the pohutukawa at this time of the year.

When summer comes calling, this is their time to shine, and it's only right and proper to delight in their vibrancy.

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