

Auckland – Gisborne – Auckland

Overview

Start Auckland / Finish Auckland

Recommended Length: 8 Days

Distance: 1677 km (1048 miles)

The Great New Zealand Touring Route

The Great New Zealand Touring Route explores the central North Island, following two signposted touring routes; the Pacific Coast Highway and the Thermal Explorer Highway.

The Pacific Coast Highway covers the drive from Auckland, through the Coromandel and Whakatane, to Napier. The Thermal Explorer Highway covers the drive from Napier, through Taupo and Rotorua, to Auckland.

This Great New Zealand Touring Route includes some of New Zealand's best beaches. Auckland kicks things off with island and coastal experiences, then you'll move on to the forest and seaside environment of the Thames coast. On the Whitianga side of the Coromandel Peninsula, a procession of surf beaches runs all the way to Opotiki. Follow the relaxing East Cape road past historic sites to Gisborne, for equal quantities of surf and chardonnay. Discover the vineyards of Napier before Taupo and Rotorua entertain you with geysers, mud pools and hot springs. On your way back to Auckland, try a riverboat cruise in Hamilton.



Day 1 – Auckland to Coromandel Town

Auckland - Thames - Coromandel Town

106 km (66 miles)

Approximately 1.5 hours

Road Conditions: Motorway/State Highway

Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, is situated between two enormous harbours and dotted with 48 extinct volcanic cones. It's a place to enjoy marine adventures, wine trails, forest walks and urban sophistication.

There are two routes to Thames. The fast way whisks you along the motorway and over the Bombay Hills, then across the serene, green Hauraki Plains to Waitakaruru. The slower, scenic route winds through farmland to the village of Clevedon before leading you around the edge of the Firth of Thames. Kawakawa Bay, Orere Point and Kaiaua are beachside settlements to visit.



Both routes make it possible to visit Miranda's hot springs and bird sanctuary. Pipiroa is a friendly place to stop before you venture over the famous, one lane Kopu Bridge, which was built in 1928 and has a Historic Places Trust listing.

The historic township of Thames was founded during the Coromandel gold rush. It's a great place for walks – around the town, through the bush and on the mangrove board walk. Visit the museum and discover an interesting range of shops.

Auckland - Thames - Coromandel Town

60 km (38 miles)



Approximately 0.5 hour
Road Conditions: State Highway

In Thames you can learn about New Zealand's gold mining past. The mining museum has a fascinating mineralogical collection and there are gold mining relics to discover on many of the bush walks. You can also take the boardwalk through the mangroves to watch seabirds in the Thames Firth.

The road to Coromandel clings to the edge of the coast. You'll enjoy amazing views and a constant procession of beautiful beaches fringed with Pohutukawa trees.

Day 2 – Coromandel Town to Tauranga

Coromandel Town - Whitianga - Whangamata - Tauranga

46 km (29 miles)

Approximately 0.5 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway

Formerly a gold-mining and timber town, Coromandel is now a haven for artists, craftspeople and conservationists. It has many well-preserved Victorian buildings and an interesting museum. There are several good walks in the area and a railway enthusiast has created an hour-long train trip at Driving Creek.



From Coromandel you can explore the tip of the peninsula – the roads aren't highly developed, so expect slow going. Colville, Port Jackson, Port Charles and Kennedy Bay are known for their untouched beauty.

On your drive to Whitianga you'll notice a side road leading to Whangapoua Beach – a worthwhile detour if you have time. You could also call into Matarangi, a recently developed beach settlement. Kuaotunu is another area of pretty beaches.

The beach town of Whitianga is home to a fishing fleet - expect to eat some excellent seafood while you're here. Best things to do include surfing, surf casting and beach

walks. Catch the ferry to the south side of the harbour – a short taxi ride will take you to Cooks Beach.

Coromandel Town - Whitianga - Whangamata - Tauranga

74 km (46 miles)

Approximately 1 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway

The road south gives you the opportunity to visit Hot Water Beach, where geothermally heated water bubbles up through the sand. At low tide you can dig your own spa. Another highlight of this journey is the walk to spectacular Cathedral Cove, which begins at Hahei. If you have time, indulge in a round of golf at Pauanui or enjoy fish and chips in Tairua.

Whangamata is one of the country's most attractive surf towns. Enjoy the beach, cafes and bush walks. Dive and fishing tours are easily arranged. You can also hire bikes, windsurfers and kayaks. Several charter companies run day trips to Mayor Island, which is actually the summit of a volcano rising from the sea floor.



Coromandel Town - Whitianga - Whangamata - Tauranga

94 km (59 miles)



Approximately 1.25 hours
Road Conditions: State Highway

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The journey to Tauranga will take you past historic Waihi, a gold mining town. You'll enjoy the fresh green scenery of the Athenree Gorge before you come across the town of Katikati, known for its murals. Roadside stalls are an opportunity to buy seasonal fruit, such as oranges, kiwifruit and avocados. Closer to Tauranga, roads on the left offer detours to the beach towns of Te Puna and Omokoroa.

Day 3 – Tauranga to Whakatane

Tauranga - Whakatane
112 km (70 miles)
Approximately 1.5 hours
Road Conditions: State Highway

The prosperous city of Tauranga sprawls along the edge of an attractive harbour. There's a well developed café culture and boat charters are available to take you big game fishing, snorkelling or dolphin watching. Nearby Mt Maunganui is a destination for surfing and beach walking.



It's an easy drive to Te Puke, a town that has turned its kiwifruit industry into visitor entertainment. As you drive eastward, fabulous views of the surf coast are with you nearly all the way. At Matata you can choose to take the main highway through the town of Edgecumbe, famous for its 1987 earthquake,

or you can follow the scenic coastal route via Thornton and Paroa.

Day 4 – Whakatane to Gisborne

Whakatane - Opotiki - Te Araroa - Gisborne
58 km (36 miles)
Approximately 0.75 hour
Road Conditions: State Highway/Arterial

The main centre for the Eastern Bay of Plenty, Whakatane is one of the sunniest towns in New Zealand. Just offshore is White Island, a spectacular active volcano that can be visited by launch or helicopter. Other Whakatane attractions include the museum, an observatory and Maori historical sites. In summer, dolphin swimming is the thing to do.

The short trip to Opotiki takes you past Ohope, a friendly coastal town with 11 kms of uninterrupted beach for swimming, walking, surfing and fishing. You'll drive through gently rolling hill country – the foothills of the Urewera Ranges. Small settlements appear regularly. Local Maori culture is strong in this region, so look for carved meeting houses and unique churches.

Whakatane - Opotiki - Te Araroa - Gisborne
159 km (99 miles)
Approximately 2 hours
Road Conditions: State Highway



Opotiki has a good range of accommodation and shops. Eco-tourism activities make excellent use of the beautiful coastal and forest environment - horse trekking, kayaking, river rafting and dolphin swimming are some of the entertainment options. There's a lot to see and do as you drive around the edge of East Cape. Have fun jetboating, kayaking or white-water rafting on the Motu River, then browse the tranquil seaside settlements of Omaio, Te Kaha, Waihou Bay and Hicks Bay. Swimming, horse riding, fishing and diving are favourite local pastimes. Maori culture is strong in this area – look for carved meeting houses and gateways.



Whakatane - Opotiki - Te Araroa - Gisborne

169 km (106 miles)

Approximately 2.25 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

The village of Te Araroa is rich in Maori history. It has a 600-year-old pohutukawa tree, the largest and oldest in New Zealand, and a hotel that serves delicious meals. If you need to stretch your legs, there's a walkway to the East Cape lighthouse.

There's a lot to see and do as you drive down the edge of East Cape. At Tikitiki you'll see one of the most marvellously ornate Maori churches in New Zealand. Further south is Waipiro Bay, which has three historical marae. Te Puia Springs is a place for a hot soak in mineral water. Then at Tolaga Bay you can walk along the historic 660 metre wharf.

Gisborne is a sunny city with a reputation for good wine and fantastic surf beaches. There are more than 20 vineyards in the area – the emphasis is on Chardonnay. Kaiti Beach was the first European landing place in New Zealand.



Day 5 – Gisborne to Napier

Gisborne - Waikaremoana (Urewera National Park) - Napier

161 km (101 miles)

Approximately 2 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway

There are two routes to Waikaremoana – inland, via State Highway 36, or along the coast on State Highway 2. The inland route gives you the chance to visit Hackfalls Arboretum, one of



the largest private collections of trees in New Zealand. Te Reinga Falls is another local attraction. The coastal route provides access to Morere Hot Springs and the fabulous beaches of the Mahia Peninsula.

Waikaremoana is one of the North Island's most beautiful wilderness lakes, and the gateway to the Urewera National Park. Walking tracks around the lake are well maintained and clearly signposted. The Onepoto Caves are a highlight. Near the shores of the lake is the settlement of Aniwaniwa, where a visitor centre is located. Also on the lake shore is a motor camp with motels, cabins and tent-sites.

Gisborne - Waikaremoana (Urewera National Park) - Napier

181 km (113 miles)

Approximately 2.25 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway



After the wilds of the Urewera National Park, the town of Wairoa will feel like a bustling metropolis. As well as a lighthouse in its main street, Wairoa has an interesting museum. On the road south you'll cross the Mohaka River, known for its fishing, kayaking and rafting adventures. The last leg of your journey takes you past Lake Tutira and the turn off to Waipatiki Beach.

In 1931 a devastating earthquake nearly levelled the city of Napier. It was rebuilt in the style of the times, and is now considered the Art Deco Capital of the world. The vineyards of Hawke's Bay are all within easy reach of Napier. Another attraction is the gannet colony at Cape Kidnappers.

Day 6 – Napier to Taupo

Napier - Taupo

139 km (87 miles)

Approximately 1.75 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway



The major entertainment on the road from Napier to Taupo is the fantastic scenery. There's a bit of everything - rugged hills, beautiful valleys, gentle plains and huge vistas. At Tarawera you can walk to the hot springs, which are above the Waipunga River. You might also want to stop at the Waiarua Falls lookout, to view the twin waterfalls.

The resort town of Taupo sits on the edge of New Zealand's largest lake, which is well stocked with sizeable trout. You'll find everything a traveller could wish for, including an excellent choice of restaurants.

Most accommodation establishments make good use of the underground thermal activity to provide hot spas for relaxation.

Day 7 – Taupo to Rotorua

Taupo - Rotorua

81 km (51 miles)

Approximately 1 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway

The road to Rotorua will keep you entertained with its unusual, volcanic geography and refreshing tracts of plantation pine forest. Near the beginning of your journey you'll encounter Huka Falls, a world-acclaimed golf course and the Wairakei Geothermal Power Station.

If you have an hour or two to spare, take a side road to a geothermal park. You'll discover geysers, silica terraces and craters of boiling mud.

The city of Rotorua sits squarely on the Pacific Ring of Fire, so there's evidence of volcanic activity everywhere you look. Explore the geothermal areas and discover the unique culture of New Zealand's Maori people. Rotorua is entertaining in any weather, at any time of the year.



Day 8 – Rotorua to Auckland

Rotorua - Cambridge - Hamilton - Auckland

87 km (54 miles)

Approximately 1.25 hours

Road Conditions: State Highway



The first part of your journey takes you past the gondola and luge rides of Mt Ngongotaha, then into the unusual terrain of the Mamaku district. Mini volcanic cones dot the landscape, some showing their solidified lava core. Enjoy plantation pine forest and a refreshing patch of native bush, Fitzgerald Glade, before you drive into the town of Tirau, a village known for its antique shops and animal-shaped corrugated iron buildings.

Rotorua - Cambridge - Hamilton - Auckland

23 km (14 miles)

Approximately 0.25 hour

Road Conditions: State Highway

The town of Cambridge is located in the heart of the Waikato's affluent farming and horse breeding district. It has a relaxed country atmosphere, lovely tree lined streets and many well preserved heritage buildings. While in Cambridge you can shop for antiques and art, attend a horse show, graze the local restaurants, embark on an eco-adventure or simply enjoy the splendid parks and gardens.

The short trip north takes you through prime Waikato farmland. When you reach Hamilton, you'll see how the mighty Waikato River brings a unique beauty to the city.

Rotorua - Cambridge - Hamilton - Auckland

127 km (79 miles)

Approximately 1.5 hours

Road Conditions: Motorway/State Highway

The city of Hamilton is carved in two by the mighty Waikato River. Attractions include gardens, riverboat cruising and a giant free flight aviary. Excellent restaurants and cafes can be found at the southern end of the main street.



The Waikato River will accompany you for much of your journey north. You'll see side roads leading to Waingaro Hot Springs and Raglan, a surf resort on the west coast. Other places of interest along the way include the coal town of Huntly and the wine growing district of Te Kauwhata.

You know you're getting close to Auckland when you reach the motorway at the base of the Bombay Hills. The scenery will change gradually from market gardens to bloodstock farms to suburbia.

As you approach Auckland, you can't miss the extinct volcanic cones that dot the landscape – there are 48 in all. The city also has two huge harbours, so it's an ideal base for marine adventures. Other attractions include wine trails, forest walks and the culinary temptations of the city's restaurant zones.

Source: Tourism New Zealand (Our thanks to the team at Tourism New Zealand for these itineraries).