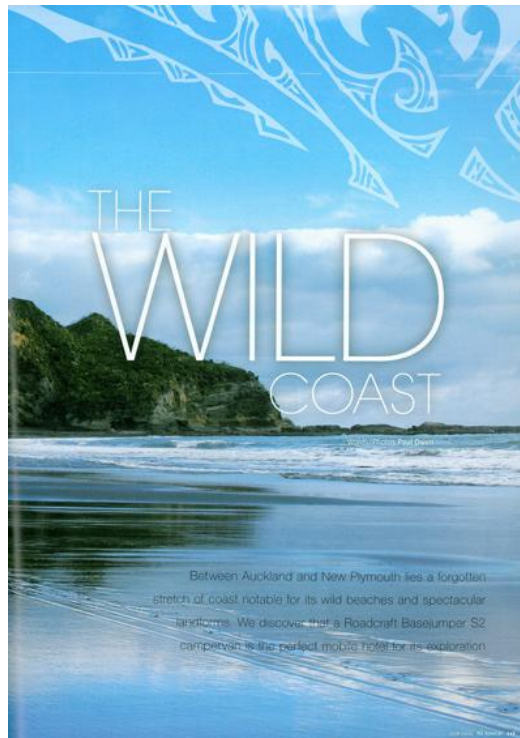


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The Forgotten Coast

Words/photos Paul Owen

Between Auckland and New Plymouth lies a forgotten stretch of coast notable for its wild beaches and spectacular landforms. We discover that a RoadCraft Base Jumper S2 campervan is the perfect mobile hotel for its exploration

Most Kiwis only get to admire the wild west coast beaches between Taranaki and Auckland from the artificial climate of a Boeing 737 cabin on flights between our largest city and Wellington. The region is notable for three things: a tortuous topography that has made its civilisation difficult, a profound absence of visitors due

to a lack of tourist facilities, and its place in early Maori history.

As a boy, I was taught that seven canoes formed a 'great fleet' that brought the resilient race to these shores sometime around 1350. It now appears more likely that some forty-odd double-hulled catamarans travelled independently of each other, driven to migration by violent upheavals in the East Polynesian homeland of Hawaiki (probably the Cooks and Society Islands). And while the debate about the logistics of Maori migration continues, it



appears that at least six of these canoes landed on the wave-swept shores of the

wild, black-sand beaches between Ngamotu (New Plymouth) and Tamaki (Auckland).

Using a four-wheeled canoe of our own, a RoadCraft Base Jumper S2 campervan, we traced some of the steps that forged a nation. But unlike the ancestors of the local iwi, we encountered no hardship on our trip, so well equipped was the shelter of our mobile whare.

Leaving Auckland on Good Friday, we joined a population on the move, but the traffic thinned progressively as we descended the Bombay Hills. About sixty per cent of the holiday-seekers turned towards Coromandel and SH2, and when we jumped off SH1 at Rangiriri, it was like someone had suddenly cleared the roads with an intercontinental missile.

On bumpy back-roads, the Base Jumper's interior began to emit a small symphony of rattles and hums that increased in volume as the road surface deteriorated. Though never loud enough to be annoying or interfere with conversation, it did serve to remind that we were in a campervan. It's easy to forget this when at the wheel of a Fiat Ducato. The 2.8 litre common-rail turbo diesel might only make 94kW of peak power, but the 300Nm of torque it generates motivates 2.5 tonnes of fully equipped camper with ease. A tight turning circle and a soft ride also contributed to the Ducato's car-like driving persona. By Pirongia, my pillion-in-a-million was dozing contentedly as the kilometres zipped by beneath the RoadCraft's wheels. It took the twists and turns of the hilly road approaching Kawhia to bring her back to the present again.

After a refreshing walk on the ocean beach west of the town and a paddle in the hot

springs that bubble to the surface of its black sands, it was a quick trip north to the

mouth of the Aotea Harbour to set up camp for the night. Not that there was much to do, other than parking the Base Jumper on the level, and applying the handbrake. Best to check whether this was an appropriate spot. At the end of the road was a marked-off area with a 'no camping' sign. Could this have been the resting place of the *Aotea* canoe, I wondered? A quick chat with some locals confirmed that we could park our own 'canoe' beside the area without causing cultural offence.

Our site had a view of the estuary, and we watched the sun retreat into the Tasman as we ate dinner in our camp chairs. Next morning, as the tide rushed in to cover the many sandbanks, two stray dogs were left with no option but to swim for it. Despite the swift currents, they made it back to the village.

We decamped to tour Kawhia Harbour, and found that a popular Saturday pastime on a favourable tide is to fish for kahawai from the bridges that cross its many arms. Not that we had time for more than a quick hello, for the border of Waitomo district is full of natural wonders, most of them ignored by the tourist hordes that visit the famous glow-worm caves.

The high rainfall acts as master carver of this limestone landscape, and our first port of call was the 'natural bridge' at Mangapohue, 26km west of the well patronised caves. This double limestone archway is the natural equivalent of a Max Escher stairway, and all the more amazing for its dimensions. If visiting, do walk a little



further than just the arches, as beyond lie rocks where you can see fossilised oysters 35 million years old. It's a unique

experience to encounter something so instantly recognisable yet that dates from the dawn of life.

Piripiri Cave is just another 4km down the road from Mangapohue, and offers a look into the maze-like bowels of the Earth's crust. Passages stretch in every direction. Expect no glow-worms, but a close encounter with humungous cave wetas is a possibility.

Two kilometres further west lies the track to Marokopa Falls, a great place to wash off any muddy residue after exploring the cave. The 30m plunge of the Marokopa River produces a spectacular amount of fine spray, and if the sun is in a playful mood, you may find yourself enclosed in a personal rainbow.

From the falls, the road follows the river towards the sleepy little fishing village that bears the same name. In the recent past, reaching Marokopa involved lots of gravel road, but the seal now extends past the town almost to the next beach – Kiritehere. From here the Base Jumper took a 24km stretch of gravel to Waikawau Beach in its stride.

Here, the side road to the coast ends abruptly by a steep hillside, but a narrow tunnel allows access to a spectacular beach by foot. Evidently, three blokes carved it out with picks and shovels in 1911, so wool and sheep could be loaded on boats from the sands. In doing so they opened up one of the best rock fishing spots in the North Island. If visiting without the luxury of a shower-equipped campervan, Waikawau is

happy to provide one, albeit with cold water, in the form of a waterfall.

Next day we motored back to the refinements of the State Highway system, joining the main road to New Plymouth at Awakino. The rattles and hums of the Ducato's interior immediately quietened on smoother road surfaces, and SH3 quickly led us to the Mohakatino and Tongaporutu Rivers, respective landing places of the *Tahatuna* and *Tokomaru* canoes.

Unfortunately, we were there at full tide, so exploring their eroded sandstone cliffs and wave-carved caves will have to wait for another day. Instead, we wandered the Whitecliffs walkway, catching the occasional glimpse from the cliff-tops of the sandstone pillars that form the 'Three Sisters'. The fact that the 'three' are now 'two' highlights the unstable nature of this area, and warnings not to venture too close to the edge are worth heeding. Scott Cook's book (see sidebar) notes places where you can feel the earth shake with the force of each wave hitting the coast – not an experience recommended for the faint of heart.

Finally, it was on to New Plymouth, where the *Kahutara*, *Taikoria* and *Okori* canoes came ashore. Here, among the roller-bladers and families enjoying the city's popular coastal walkway, it was possible that Easter Sunday to imagine some of the relief those Polynesian explorers must have felt at reaching such a favourable and fair land.

Base-Jumping Without Leaving the Ground

The Base Jumper S2 is RoadCraft's first attempt at a campervan completely designed for New Zealand conditions,



including our often rough back-road network and sometimes inclement climate.

It's also tailored to our liking for carting a few toys along with the luggage. The company has followed the S2 with larger versions that can accommodate more travellers, including a new Volkswagen Crafter-based camper that is now the largest model.

As a travelling couple, we felt quite at home with the S2, but the limiting factor of the original and most affordable RoadCraft is immediately apparent to those looking at the sleeping arrangements: a queen-sized bed. Close relations with your travelling companion are a prerequisite.

That said, extra sleeping space is the only thing that the BJ S2 is short of. Built within the confines of a Fiat Ducato Maxi van body, this camper is nothing short of a compact yet luxurious mobile hotel room on wheels. The bed rates as one of the most comfortable we've experienced in a campervan, and the attention to detail is superb. Nice touches include the solid macrocarpa sink bench, the robust nature of the gravel-road-friendly joinery, and the quality of the cutlery, kitchen implements and china. This is a campervan that those used to a luxurious lifestyle can rent/own/use without feeling they are ever roughing it.

That luxury extends to a toilet/shower cubicle with hot and cold running water. With a 90-litre water tank, a similarly sized grey-water receptor, a deep-cycle inverter, two LPG bottles to supply energy and an easily serviced toilet cassette, the Base Jumper can settle down for several fully independent days. Its batteries will start to run out of charge only after about five days

of parked-up camping. In any extended touring scenario, there is no need to visit a power site to recharge (although motor-camp laundry facilities may seem attractive every now and then).

Meanwhile, even a fuel-head like me appreciates the increased environmental responsibility allowed by the S2; having enjoyed a night somewhere wild, it's a good feeling to drive off the next day, secure in the knowledge all your waste and rubbish is conveniently catered for by your mode of travel. We left only our footprints and the Fiat's tyre tracks at the places we visited. That smugness is all the more encouraged by the indulgences the S2 supplies. The entertainment system includes TV, DVD player and a fine-sounding audio system with iPod/MP3 connectivity. Enduring a dark, starless night with a tent-flattening wind howling in the trees was no challenge at all, tucked as we were in the S2's warm bed, with Jools Holland and his mates performing their musical magic on the DVD. Two road-weary travellers genuinely felt like they were cocooned in a five-star hotel at that moment.

Unique, custom-made roof racks can be ordered as an option. Ours would carry a pair of mountain bikes and a two-person kayak, toys we left at home on this journey for fear of restricting the overhead clearance when driving in the bush.

Up front, you're aware you've somehow downgraded from a luxury vehicle into a rather ordinary light commercial. Where the Kiwi-made and -installed camper fit-out withstood the pummelling of gravel roads pretty agreeably, the Ducato cab didn't seem to fare so well. In terms of its equipment, the Fiat is fleet-special basic. The cab's audio system is a Blaupunkt unit



of 20th Century vintage, and the lack of drink-holders is also questionable. On the plus side, there is a large, lockable cubby on

the centre console, and door bins spacious enough to carry a map for every country on the globe.

If the Fiat is basic in its cab furnishing, the powertrain is brilliant. The 2.8 litre turbodiesel hauled the Base Jumper up hills with ease, allied to a snickable six-speed manual. The top gear of the six-speed was a real fuel-saver on the highway. We averaged less than 10L/100km over our 1200km journey, despite cruising at well

above the mean highway speed when the traffic allowed.

If you're keen on having one in your driveway, RoadCraft's wilderness-ready campers start at around \$130K. That's great value given the quality of the product.

There's another option, however:

Wilderness Motorhomes has an extensive fleet for hire. Although rates during peak times can be as high as \$310 per day, winter sees this dropping to just \$110, and the four-layer insulation of the camper body and inbuilt diesel-fired central heating makes travelling in a cold climate no hardship.

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