

New Zealand Herald – Amanda Linnell Road trip: Free-range foray



We're riding high. So high, in fact, that as we swing out on to the Southern Motorway the driver of a passing lorry gives us a knowing wave.

Our Roadcraft Basejumper van puts us on a level with the big boys and as the road opens out in front of us, we are filled with the anticipation that only a road trip can bring. We have a map, yes. We have a fridge stocked with good wine and food. We have all the luxuries of a designer apartment on wheels. Plans? No. But that is the point of this kind of holiday.

"It's all about getting off the beaten track," enthused Gray Borrell from Roadcraft before we left. "In fact, if you don't, you shouldn't be driving one of these.

"We call them Overland Camping Vehicles [OCVs] because they're designed for those who like freedom, getting out in the wilderness, and away from normality and conformity."

All we know is that we have four uncharted days ahead of us. We're heading to the Coromandel – the perfect place for a long weekend within easy reach of the city – and the world's our... scallop.

Roadcraft has organised our first night's "Wildspot" location – the bottom of Rita Stephenson's garden in Coromandel township. It doesn't sound that wild. But as we squeeze our home around the corner of her old villa and bump across a lawn the size of a paddock, we find ourselves in a secluded corner surrounded by native trees and a crystal-clear river.

Our neighbours? A family of giant black eels lolling in the water that gulp the bread we throw to them. We lie in the afternoon sun and embrace the soothing sounds of slow-flowing river, amazed that just a few hours ago we were in busy downtown Auckland.

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Tempted as we are to stay put, we wander into town and find ourselves caught up in the Monteith's Café Crawl, part of the annual Pohutakawa Festival. There are cocktails at the Star and Garter pub before everyone jumps on a bus and heads out to the Coromandel Oyster Company.

We'd passed this on our way into town, so imagine our joy on finding a smorgasbord of succulent oysters ripe for the eating. Grown in beds in the harbour in front of us, they don't come fresher than this. We try not to look greedy as we head up for our third helping.

The noise on the bus amplifies as wine lubricates the enthusiasm of the group – a healthy mix of locals and tourists – as we head back into town to the Peppertree Restaurant for delicious duck and fresh fish.

The next morning, following the advice of new friends made the night before, we head further up the coast. Our first stop: the incredible and somewhat surreal world of Barry Brickell's Driving Creek Railway and Pottery.

Back in 1961, Brickell bought a hillside of scrubland aiming to create an artists' collective. Today it is a thriving pottery. When we visit there are two artists in residence, the scrub has been returned to native forest, and attractions include a wildlife sanctuary and a sculpture park. But the piece de resistance is the narrow-gauge train track which winds its way through 60ha – over viaducts, through tunnels, all the way to the Eyefull Tower – where you can take in the stupendous views of the region.

From here, and with time on our side, we call into the nearby Driving Creek Organic Cafe, with its faded Buddhist prayer flags fluttering in the wind, and sit on the balcony sipping smoothies.

Back on the road, we head through Colville, turn on to the metal road and rumble with ease out to Waikawau Bay and Little Bay. Here a handful of baches are mostly closed up for the weekend and we have the white-sand beach to ourselves. There are no shops here, so thank goodness for our meals on wheels.

After a late lunch, we head to the south of the beach and, after a 20-minute climb up a bush track, we find ourselves on the headland, where we flop into the long grass and watch the clouds float by.

The plan was to stay the night up here... but when you're free-wheeling, plans are made to be broken. We decide to head back towards Coromandel township so we don't waste any precious daylight the next day driving. An impossibly beautiful sunset proves hard to resist and we pull over on to a grassy verge just metres from the high-tide line to watch it slowly sink behind the hills.

As we discuss the pros and cons of potential locations, a tui flies in to watch us from a nearby flax bush. "Perhaps we should just stay here?" we both say at the same time. Within minutes the rug is out on the grass, the deck chairs up and a gourmet feast is pulled from the fridge (kaimoana from The Coromandel Smoking Co, organic produce bought at the local farmers' market). Perfect.

As night sets in we snuggle into our beds and watch a DVD on the TV screen above the beds. Worn out by a day of swimming, walking, eating and exploring, we fall asleep well before the movie finishes.

The next morning we're up and ready to go. We stop for fresh coffees and then head up over the hills to Whangapoua Beach. A quick stop for breakfast supplies at the local store is waylaid as we get the giggles trying on oversized straw hats.

Our mission today is to explore New Chums Bay, a 30-minute walk from the end of Whangapoua beach, and hats are a must even if they're not going to score us any points in the style stakes.

After a breakfast of fresh fruit, yoghurt and muesli, we pack towels, sunblock and more supplies from the fridge and head off. New Chums has been described as one of the 10 most beautiful beaches in the world, and after scrambling across rocks and a long the dirt track that leads past beautiful nikaus and bush, we understand why.

All further plans for exploring are put on hold as we nestle under the twisted roots of a pohutakawa and spend the day sunbathing and swimming.

"Um, are we living the dream?" "Mmmmmmmmmmm," is the sleepy reply.

The only thing that gets us moving is rumbling tums. We are soon back behind the wheel and meandering our way towards Hahei. We have a date first thing in the morning with the guys

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at Cathedral Cove Kayaks, and by parking up right by the beach we'll be fresh and ready for action.

We pull up alongside some British backpackers who are pulling all their belongings out of their banged-up station wagon to find their picnic table, chairs and bed (there's a bed in there?). We've been there and done that – the budget road trip where you spend half your time pitching tents, scrabbling through your gear and walking miles to find water.

A wave of smugness washes over us as we slide back the OCV's doors, grab a bottle of chilled wine from the fridge and settle in to watch the last of the day's sunlight play on the water.

Tonight we cheat and get fish and chips from the local store. Our van's back doors swing right back and we feel like we're in a penthouse waterfront apartment with multimillion-dollar views. The stars sparkle in the clear sky and we are lulled to sleep by the sound of breaking waves.

We're woken by a spectacular sunrise, have a pre-breakfast swim, and then stumble along the beach to meet Mike and the crew for our sea kayaking adventure.

The morning is spent paddling through gentle swells around the nearby islands, hearing about the history of the area and the wildlife that lives in the marine reserve, navigating through a sea cave and trying not to capsize as we surf into Cathedral Cove, where our guide puts on the primus and whips up great-tasting cappuccinos for everyone along with tasty home-cooked biscuits. Delicious.

By the time we get back to base, it's lunchtime and we while away a few hours on the beach, reluctant to start the return journey to Auckland. But you can't put off the inevitable.

A keen fisherman friend has requested I bring back macadamia nut sprinkles from Cathedral Cove Macadamias, which transform fresh fish into a crunchy delight, so we follow the signposts to the picturesque farm.

Roadside stalls selling fresh produce prove pleasant distractions as we work to delay leaving the Coromandel. As does the superb Moko Art Gallery at Hot Water Beach – where we blow the budget on a beautiful garden sculpture and jewellery made by local artist Hannah Clayton.

Another delay tactic falls into place as we leave the Coromandel and follow the Firth of Thames through Miranda to Kaiaua. We're not alone on this route and are amazed to see campervans parked bumper-to-bumper along the coast for over a kilometre. Bird-watching, perhaps? Who knew?

But we speed on to Kawakawa Bay, where we make the last-minute decision to spend another night on the water's edge and, hey, if we get up early we can have the OCV back to base and be in the office in time for that 9am meeting. Here's to living the dream for just one more night.

Amanda Linnell's OCV was provided by Roadcraft.

ROADCRAFT:

Call at 21 Rennie Drive, Airport Oaks, phone (09) 255 5300 or visit www.roadcraft.co.nz

COROMANDEL:

Coromandel Oyster Company, 1611 SH25, Tiki Rd, Coromandel, phone (07) 866 8028.

The Coromandel Smoking Company, 70 Tiki Rd, Coromandel, phone (07) 866 8793.

The Peppertree Restaurant, 31 Kapanga Rd, Coromandel, phone (07) 866 8211.

Cathedral Cove Sea Kayaking, 88 Hahei Beach Rd, Hahei, phone (07) 866 3877.

Cathedral Cove Macadamias, 335 Lees Rd, Hahei, phone (07) 867 1230, or see cathedralcovemacadamias.co.nz

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Visit thecoromandel.com