

# Land of the gods

Led by incandescent stars, nature writer Jini Reddy communes with the deities of sky, forest and sea in mystical New Zealand

**T**his is my first, star-filled night on Aotea, the Maori name for Great Barrier Island. Jet-lagged and wide awake, I recall the words I'd whispered to the ancestors of this land before my trip: that I was coming to honour them and I hoped they might guide me on my journey.

I leave my bed at Trillium Lodge, high on a hilltop amid native bush on this off-grid, solar-powered isle, and tiptoe onto the viewing deck. Beneath me is a quiet harbour – the island sits on the edge of a vast, protected marine park – and I can taste peace. All is silent, as velvety as the night sky. The ghostly white ribbon above me is the Milky Way. Some 800 years ago, those stars guided the Maori people, who rowed their great waka, or migration canoes, from the South Pacific to 'The Land of the

Long White Cloud' or Aotearoa – New Zealand.

These same stars will be my gateway, and what a show they will put on for me, night after night. In fact, Aotea is the first island-based Dark Sky Sanctuary in the world and I explore this celestial wonderland with Deborah Kilgallon, of the aptly named Good Heavens. Through her telescope, she shows me the Southern Cross, one of many constellations that the Maori might have used as a navigational aid. We glimpse Jupiter, the largest planet in our solar system, Alpha Centauri, the closest star to the earth after the sun and the mysterious rings of Saturn.

Aotea maybe my first stop, but I fall madly in love with it instantly. It's not difficult: the island is a blur of silky white sand beaches, gentle bays, subtropical rainforest and even a sacred mountain, Hira-  
kimata. >>>>

I spot a pod of orca in Puriri Bay near my lodge. ‘You’re lucky – we only see them once or twice a year!’ I am told. A shiver runs up my spine and I mouth a silent thank you to the ancestors.

I walk to the Kaitoke hot springs on a pristine track that skirts a wetland. It’s home to rare birds and plants and thick with ferns. A little fantail bird hops beside me, all the way to the springs. The locals call it ‘wai te puia’, or waters of healing. With the light streaming through the trees, the warmth of the water and the serenity, these waters *are* divine.

### Our protectors

A day later, on North Island, I stare at a landscape of sand dunes. My vantage point is a lookout over Hokianga harbour, in the country’s Far North. Many Maori trace their roots back to these shores. ‘Our ancestor, explorer Kupe, was the first to reach land here at the mouth of the harbour,’ says Merepaea Kendall, my guide, whose tribe is the Ngapuhi. She tells me spirit guardians protect the harbour. ‘No waka ever crashed here, thanks to the prayers of those ancient canoeists.’

Merepaea tells me that kauri trees once covered the land but they were seen as a barrier to progress and millions were felled. ‘We lost much of the forest, and it was turned into land for dairy farming,’ she says. Thanks to the efforts of conservationist William McGregor, the logging eventually ended.

In the vast Waipoua forest, we wander past those that are still thriving – towering tree deities with girths befitting gods. We approach Te Matua Ngahere, the Father of the Forest, and fall silent. ‘Such a being demands respect,’ says Merepaea, who sings as we walk reverently towards this venerable being. The giant kauri has a presence like no other and I stand in awe. ‘Te Matua Ngahere is more than 3,500 years old,’ she whispers.

We meet the great God of the Forest, Tane Mahuta, who rises above the canopy, beloved by all. In Maori myth, the largest kauri in the country is the son of the Sky Father and the Earth Mother. ‘Tane pulled apart his parents until his father, the sky, was high above his mother earth.’

Leaving my eco lodge, Kokohuia, I meet artist Tui Slater and

her partner Mark Williamson. ‘The art tours I lead are a way to connect people with the local community,’ says Tui, as they drive me along rural back roads to the stunning Bay of Islands. We pause to look at four Maori pou, carved wooden posts in the form of gods, placed to protect sailors: God of Peace, Goddess of the Ocean, God of Wind and God of Sea Creatures.

It is in Rotorua, a landscape of lakes and bubbling geysers, that I experience the hongi, the traditional Maori greeting. Nose to nose, forehead to forehead, this exchange of the breath of life is initiated with the utmost gentleness – in my case, with a man sporting a face full of tribal tattoos. We meet in a Maori village, Ohinemutu, on the shores of Lake Rotorua, the ancestral home of healer and guide Wikitoria Oman. I am over the moon to spend time with Wiki, for I have a deep interest in healing. She drives me to Okere Falls, on the shores of Lake Rotoiti. Here I learn about Maori medicine. ‘Plants are all brothers and sisters,’ she says, as we explore, sniff and taste our way through the bush. Next, we head to Wiki’s home, where she gives me a romi romi massage. ‘My ancestors are working with your ancestors,’ she explains.

“Nose to nose, this exchange of the breath of life is initiated with the utmost gentleness”

### Wistful goodbye

Towards the end of my stay, I fly to the South Island and the remote Mount Cook Lakeside Retreat. It sits in a forest wilderness near Lake Pukaki. With the turquoise waters and views of Aoraki – the highest peak in New Zealand – its beauty is surreal. I have my own villa, spa, the services of a yoga teacher and masseuse and, heaven oh heaven, my own hot tub: five minutes after I arrive, I leap into it, relaxing and listening to birdsong while watching the ever-changing sky, shifting clouds and the golden light turning into the sweetest dusk.

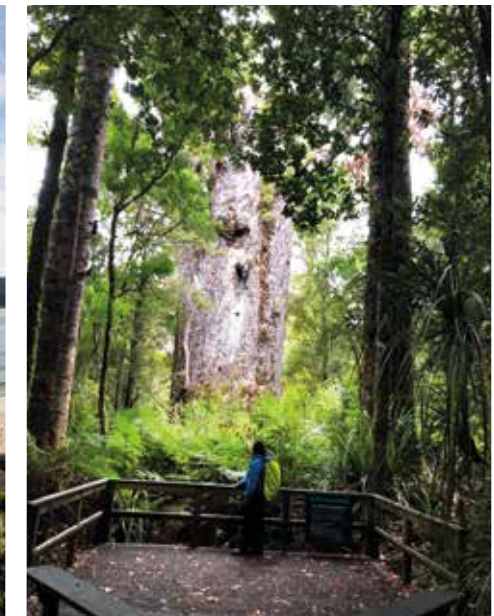
This is a once-in-lifetime rejuvenation retreat. There is an observatory on the premises too and, after dinner, I enjoy the majesty of the blazing night sky. The following morning, I soak up the views, walk along the pine trails and give thanks to Aotearoa for holding me so gently. ‘Tena koe; farewell, until the next time,’ I whisper, as I reluctantly head home.

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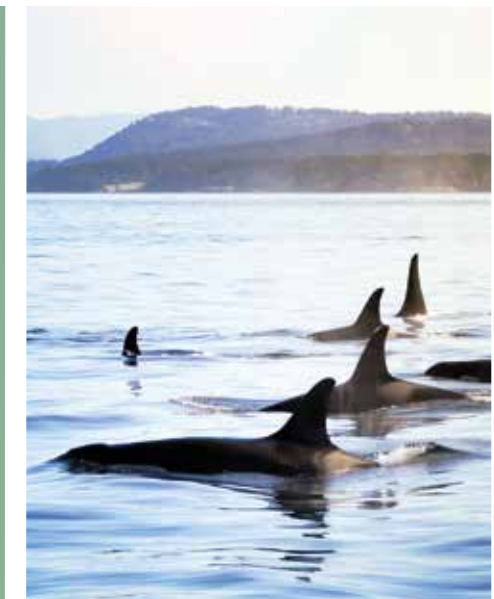
● **Jini Reddy’s trip was hosted** by Tourism New Zealand and she flew courtesy of Thai Airways. Thai Airways flights from London to Auckland start from £780 per person. Book

at [newzealand.com](http://newzealand.com) and [thaiairways.com](http://thaiairways.com)  
● **Her guides and hosts were:** [footprintswaipoua.co.nz](http://footprintswaipoua.co.nz); [rotoruanativetours.co.nz](http://rotoruanativetours.co.nz); [goodheavens.co.nz](http://goodheavens.co.nz); [roguepony.co.nz](http://roguepony.co.nz)

● **There was a volcanic eruption on White Island** in December. The Foreign Office has advised that travel to most areas of New Zealand is safe. White Island, however, remains in unstable conditions with toxic gases and ash in the area. Around 200,000 British nationals visit New Zealand every year and most visits are trouble-free. [gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/new-zealand](http://gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/new-zealand)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT  
Writer Jini takes a breather while walking along the shore at Medlands Beach on Great Barrier Island; sands stretch into turquoise sea, before melding into blue sky, awash with clouds; in awe before gigantic tree deity Te Matua Ngahere, the Father of the Forest, in Waipoua; a pod of orca slice through the ocean; healer and guide Wikitoria Oman, who teaches Jini about plant-based Maori medicine; a tub with a view at Mount Cook Lakeside Retreat; Mount Cook on South Island is the highest peak in New Zealand at 3,724 metres



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