



# Island artscape

Susannah Walker returns to her former home in the Hauraki Gulf populated by artists and alternative lifestyles.

When he sees me taking photos of the swirls and spirals carved into a rickety wooden table outside his lean-to studio, sculptor Chris Bailey lets out a big belly laugh. "That's just my snook table, mate," he says, amused that I'm interested in the rough doodles he's made on the table during breaks from work.

But to me, a Kiwi who lives in Australia, these patterns – recurring forms in traditional Maori art – are potent symbols of the motherland. Bailey is a solid, genial New Zealander who works and lives on Waiheke (pronounced "why-heckie") Island in the Hauraki Gulf, 30 minutes by ferry and a whole world away from Auckland.

I lived on this island, too, until I moved to Melbourne in 2007. As I sit with Bailey in the yard outside his studio, while he peels a kiwifruit and tells me about his work, everything I love about this eclectic little place comes flooding back.

Of about 8000 permanent residents, more than 100 are practising artists, many of whom open their studios to visitors. Pre-eminent New Zealand sculptor Denis O'Connor moved to the island 40 years ago and gathered a group of artists around him; others followed, drawn by Waiheke's beauty and easy pace. The bush-clad hills and numerous swimming beaches, fringed with ancient Pohutukawa (New Zealand's native "Christmas tree"), are also populated by generations of alternative lifestyles. The island is home to a diverse community of greens and hippies, well-heeled refugees from the city, young families, commuters and some of New Zealand's wealthiest business people.

Humble fibro "baches" (Kiwi-speak for beach houses) sit beside glass and steel palaces on large estates. Because it's near a major city and because some locals are fiercely against it, there is no large-scale development – no shopping malls, multiplex cinemas or even traffic lights. The place has a semi-rural, seaside-holiday air, which



is a big part of its charm (yet, thanks to the 30 boutique wineries dotted around the island, you can eat at some of the Auckland region's best restaurants here).

"Waiheke is not too polished," says a long-time resident, "and that's the beauty of it." It's a place where locals greet visitors on the street and where an islander you've never met holds your hand when you look terrified on a rough ferry crossing, as one once did for me.

Bailey, a full-time artist whose Maori, Irish and Dutch heritage is central to his work, moved here 15 years ago and immediately felt at home. "I felt instantly relaxed and then later on I explored my roots and I discovered, ahhh, my people were here," he says. "Back in the day this island was part of their stamping ground."



He works in wood and stone, including the old ugly mudstone from Waiheke Island, which he finds beautiful. As they say in the stone world, "God loves the ugly stones, too". His work has become increasingly monumental ("I like the grumpy stuff, I get a testosterone burn out of it") and when we meet he is about to start his most ambitious work to date – a 2.5 tonne sculpture he will carve from Chinese granite.

Like much of his work, it has the moon at its heart and is an exploration of relationship with the land and concepts of home and is inspired by the tribes that have come to the island over the centuries. "Even today it seems to be an island where people come to discover themselves or to move on from the mainland and put their anchor down to create a new life," Bailey says. "It's also

about the moon's influence on everything, on the environment and on us and the ocean, how we use anchors to stop vessels disappearing with the tide, how partners can be our anchors in business and in intimate relationships. The notion of the anchor stone."

The completed work will be on show at Headland Sculpture on the Gulf, a biennial outdoor exhibition on the island, on January 28 to February 20. The memory of attending this event when I lived on Waiheke still makes me smile, thanks to the quality of the work by established and emerging artists and the spectacular setting – a two-kilometre coastal track that meanders around the headland of Church Bay as the sea thunders below.

The exhibition will feature 40 new large-scale

works selected from more than 160 submissions by New Zealand and international artists. Chosen for their appropriateness to the site and connection with the landscape by a panel of New Zealand selectors, there are interactive and kinetic works, soundscapes and installations. "We are getting cutting-edge, innovative new work," the event's director, Juliet Monaghan says. "The site is a very significant part of the event and the work is often site-specific ... some are even referencing a specific tree."

Japanese-born Kazu Nakagawa, who has lived on the island for two decades, walked the coastal track many times while ideas percolated for his exhibit of 200 umbrellas, which will be carried by visitors at the exhibition. Each umbrella is emblazoned with the word "aendaemii" from the

phonetic form of the musical term "andante" (meaning "moderately slow").

An initiative of the Waiheke Community Art Gallery, which opened as an artists' co-operative 15 years ago and now hosts 37 exhibitions a year, Headland Sculpture on the Gulf began in 2003. It attracts 26,000 visitors, making it the little island's biggest event, but the sense of community ownership is undiminished and about 150 residents work on it as volunteers.

New to Headland this year is a series of forums where exhibiting artists discuss their work, and a bus that runs between the start of the walkway and the ferry terminal, with stops at two of the island's best vineyard restaurants, Mudbrick and Cable Bay.

Headland is not the only place on Waiheke you

can see work by leading New Zealand sculptors. Te Whau Garden is a private garden open to the public and home to a 90-strong sculpture and garden-art collection.

Started 10 years ago by retired owners Kay and Lance Peterson, "the gallery in the garden" grew out of Kay's association with Headland – she has been involved heavily since its inception and is now chairwoman. It began as a small collection of work by friends and grew into a passion that gave her the impetus to clear weed-infested tracts of 16 hectares of land.

A New Zealand Gardens Trust property, each year it attracts about 1000 art-lovers and garden enthusiasts to its walking tracks through subtropical broadleaf rainforest, wetlands and gardens featuring New Zealand natives and exotics.

"My contribution is what I do with the sculptures, finding the right place for them and making it work," Kay says. "With some of them there is considerable construction around them and the planting around the work makes a big difference."

Of all the sculptures in the collection, *Prow*, by celebrated New Zealand sculptor Peter Lange (brother of late former prime minister David Lange), is her favourite. A boat's prow "woven" in vivid green tiles, it seems to rise up directly from the earth. "I love the colour and the shape," she says. "It's very elegant and beautiful. And it's very New Zealand."

Susannah Walker was a guest of Air New Zealand and Headland Sculpture on the Gulf.

Top deck ... (from far left) sea views at Waiheke Island; Collapse a work by Fletcher Vaughan that will be on show at next year's Headland Sculpture on the Gulf; the Boatshed hotel.



### FAST FACTS

**Getting there** Emirates flies from Melbourne to Auckland (2hr 35min) for \$455. From Sydney, Air New Zealand flies to Auckland (3hr) for \$330. Fares are return, including tax. Qantas, Jetstar and Virgin Blue all have fares and flights. There are regular passenger ferries (www.fullers.co.nz), vehicular ferries (subritzky.co.nz) and flights (airdiscovery.co.nz) to Waiheke Island.

**Staying there** The Boatshed, corner Tawa and Huia roads, Oneroa. This seven-room boutique hotel offers a high-end but unstuffy experience. Guests dine by candlelight at tables set with heavy linen and fine china but there is no evening dress code. Designed for couples and with sweeping ocean views, its striped canvas deckchairs, day beds and scattered shells lend a nostalgic nautical feel. Generous guest room touches include piles of good books, CDs and magazines, fresh fruit, sunscreen and jars of jelly beans. Rooms from \$NZ630 (\$490) a

night including breakfast and on-island transfers. See boatshed.co.nz.

**Eating there** Mudbrick Vineyard and Restaurant, Church Bay Road, Oneroa. While its ivy-clad restaurant surrounded by lavender and potager gardens screams French provincial, Mudbrick's European menu comes with Asian touches. It's also local, with head chef Andreas Lindberg (ex-Sydney's Aria Restaurant) serving lamb from "over the hill" and the local fisherman's catch. With views to the sea and Auckland beyond, this is the perfect spot for a lingering lunch. Open daily for lunch and dinner. See mudbrick.co.nz.

**Touring there** Headland Sculpture on the Gulf, open daily 9am to 6pm, January 28 to February 20, free. See www.sculptureonthegulf.co.nz.

Te Whau Garden, 31 Vintage Lane, Te Whau, open daily 10am to 5pm, free. See tewhaugarden.co.nz.

**More information** See waiheke.co.nz.

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