



A MOST UNUSUAL MEANDER

FANCY A FUN 36 HOURS? SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT TO TELL THE KIDS OR THE GRANDCHILDREN? HEAD OFF TO WAITOMO AND A NIGHT OR TWO IN A HOBBIT HUT.

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WHEN PETER JACKSON MADE HOBBITS FAMOUS, human beings became fascinated with them.

Now there's a motel at Waitomo called Woodlyn Park where you can experience a night in a hobbit house. It has round windows, hessian curtains and a pig and a donkey to entertain you as they graze on your roof. The "Hobbit units" are fully self-contained and can accommodate up to six people in each. The king-sized bed is super-comfortable.

If hobbits aren't your thing, you can stay in the Bristol Freighter. This plane was one of the last allied planes out of Vietnam and you can sleep upstairs beside the instrument panel if you choose.

Then there's the Waitanic. Go to sea in one of the five comfortable units on board this landlocked ship which spent her earlier days as a Waiheke Island ferry.

There's also the genuine Milky Bar Kid Train which is being restored as alternative accommodation.

All this, set in park-like grounds just a few kilometres from

Waitomo Caves, is the brainchild of Barry Woods (stage name Billy Black), who likes to provide visitors with his unique show featuring rural Kiwi life. He has a performing pig called Don Rash, a braying donkey named Don Key, the huntaway dog Rose, who brings in the sheep for shearing, and a friendly bull who loves having his neck rubbed.

Billy is a natural comedian and has an obvious love of animals. He also loves to rib Aussies and has two sets of prices for his show, one for New Zealanders and one for Australians, simply to get a reaction – "which I always do".

His show is rated highly and Woodlyn Park has been described by *Lonely Planet* (2006) as one of the top 10 most unusual motels in the world.

Woodlyn Park is just 2½ hours from Auckland, Rotorua and Taupo, or two hours from New Plymouth. We chose the latter, grabbed the Honda CRV and headed for our first stop: Te Kuiti on State Highway 3.

Mangapohue Natural Bridge



Hobbit houses at Woodlyn Park



Roger Sheppard's Origin Coffee Station



Rooms are available in the Bristol Freighter



Otorohanga - Kiwiana capital of New Zealand



Performing pig



Billy Black and friends entertain guests

THIS IS TRULY ONE OF NATURE'S "SEVEN WONDERS OF NEW ZEALAND" AND WE CAN'T BELIEVE WE HADN'T HEARD ABOUT IT BEFORE.

Settled in the late 1800s, Te Kuiti is a rural town serving the sheep and beef farmers of south Waikato. It has classic architecture to show for its heritage: restored villas, railway houses from the booming main trunk line era and, more recently, the modern Bosco Café (on the outskirts heading north) for delicious coffee.

Tiffany's café at the entrance to the main street can still lay claim to serving the best lamingtons in the North Island. Directly opposite the café is the Tatsuno Japanese Garden which was opened in 1999. The garden is beautifully cared for by Waitomo District Council and is a credit to the sistership of the council and Tatsuno city in Japan.

As the shearing capital of the world, Te Kuiti's claim is well represented by the 15-year-old, seven-metre-tall statue of a shearer and his sheep. Three time capsules have been placed in the statue to be opened at 30-year intervals - 2024, 2054, 2084. Pity we won't be around for the last one!

The best find for us in Te Kuiti was the self-help counter at New World. It's a great supermarket and as we knew our destination had self-contained units, we decided to save money and cook our own dinner at Woodlyn Park. New World's DIY counter for scan, weigh and pay was a novelty first for us and saved queuing.

With dinner sorted, our minds turned to lunch. Instead of turning off SH3 to the caves and Woodlyn Park, we carried on to Otorohanga with the intention of exploring this Kiwiana capital before doubling back to our destination. And we're glad of it.

We found The Thirsty Weta, in the main street, and sat in the sun eating fresh pasta and salad. The menu included a big breakfast with a twist: for an additional \$5 you're given a coffee, juice and Berocca for your hangover!

After lunch and still in the main street adorned with colourful floral baskets, it was time to check out the new Ed Hillary Walkway opened by Lady June Hillary in December 2008. In keeping with Otorohanga's Kiwiana theme, the walkway encases iconic New Zealand memorabilia behind glass panels to view as you stroll. There are buzzy bees, boot polish, All Blacks and the great man himself speaking via video. It was wonderful to hear that distinctive voice again and even though Sir Ed was not an Otorohanga boy, the town has paid him a fitting tribute. There is still much discussion about the best way to honour New Zealand's treasure of a man and Otorohanga has gone and done it.

Just around the corner is the town's train station, still operating on the main trunk line, but instead of having a cold pie and tea from a hefty

cup on the 10:30 to Auckland, you can have a posh latté with freshly roasted beans at the Origin Coffee Station.

The station is now Roger Sheppard's roasting house for beans imported from his former home plantation co-operative in Malawi. Legend has it that a shepherd noticed his goats prancing around all night after eating "cherries" from the bushes so he tried some himself and couldn't sleep. The cherries (coffee beans) were taken to the Pope for denouncement as the devil's drink but the Pope tasted them and blessed them instead. Quite rightly so! This is a great find while you're travelling. So, if you're passing, let your nose seek it out.

From Otorohanga we found Waitomo Valley Road and within minutes were at Woodlyn Park. Billy Black is a great host and we were lucky to get a tour of the property followed by a couple of beers and swapping of yarns.

Billy is a former shearer of note throughout Australia and the United States. He has stories galore, some of them hair-raising, and a wicked sense of humour. He has been likened more than once to comedian Robin Williams and the likeness in person is uncanny.

Yarned out, we retired for the night in our underground boudoir.

Awakening to the birdsong of sparrows and peacocks, we were soon off on our journey back home to New Plymouth. You cannot go home the way you have come so instead of

turning on to SH3 from Woodlyn Park, we turned west at the Waitomo Caves, heading to Te Anga and the beautiful Marokopa Falls.

It was just before Te Anga that we spotted a sign saying "Mangapohue Natural Bridge, five-minute walk". Here we found a limestone bridge spanning a natural gorge, which may have been the sides of a large cave. As the cave slowly grew, its roof became unstable and eventually the roof collapsed, turning the cave into a gorge with a stream flowing below. The natural bridge is the only section of the roof remaining intact.

The Department of Conservation has constructed a great walkway (disabled-friendly) where you will discover enormous fossilised oysters, 35 million years old. This is truly one of nature's "seven wonders of New Zealand" and we can't believe we hadn't heard about it before.

We stopped in at the remote Kiritehere Beach to view the preserved sand dunes. The tangata whenua are doing a remarkable job keeping use of the dunes to a minimum and the dunes were resplendent on this sunny day. There was not a soul around and I silently wished I had packed a thermos, it was so restful.

But onwards we went, over some very winding coastal roads to Awakino.

Finally we were home after a 405km round trip with only 12km of unsealed road and still quarter of a tank left. A great drive.)

HOW THE HONDA HANDLED

The CRV has great visibility with all the controls easily at fingertips.

The seats are firm but forgiving. Steering over such winding roads was positive but easy with very little body roll.

The unique foot (hand) brake is useful as it gave us cavernous space in the centre console for all her requirements.

Carrying a lot of expensive photographic gear, the back boot provided perfect concealment and, being on two levels, made packing a breeze.

The vehicle was excellent for petrol economy.

THINGS TO DO

- Waitomo Caves exploration
- Otorohanga's Kiwi House
- Blackwater rafting
- Horse trekking
- 4x4 bike riding

WHERE TO EAT

Tiffany's Café for lamingtons, Te Kuiti Bosco Café, Te Kuiti

Supermarket at the northern end of Te Kuiti's main street for your DIY dinner (if you're coming from the south)

The Big Apple on SH3 offers drivers a free coffee and feeds the bus tours The Thirsty Weta, café and bar Origin Coffee Station at Otorohanga Woodlyn Park - cook for yourself in the self-contained units or, for conferences, there is a full catering and bar service

Supermarket at the southern end of Otorohanga's main street for your DIY dinner (if you're coming from the north)