





# Bigger is best?

With rose-tinted glasses firmly in place, **Laura Vincent** heads north from Wellington to see if a weekend getaway to Auckland can still live up to expectations.



Using the Link+ function on your stuff.co.nz app, scan the main image on this page with your smartphone for a video-tour around Auckland in 60 seconds.

IT'S POSSIBLY not the coolest thing to admit: I've always found Auckland pretty thrilling.

Whenever there, I revert from relatively well-travelled, would-be sybarite, back to seeing the big smoke in the same starry-eyed way I did while growing up in a particularly miniature, pastoral village south of the Bombsays.

But however rose-tinted or, indeed, nonexistent your glasses, Auckland is full of surprises.

**Friday, 7pm:** After a swift post-work flight, Tim and I drive our rental to the Langham Hotel. It's worth noting you pay for parking once there – a small fee stands between a jaunty valet service and doing it yourself, the former of which will at least be less stressful and make you feel like a character in the excellent film *Clueless*. The Langham is peerlessly plush, with an huge chandelier in the lobby – admittedly, I am easily impressed by a big chandelier – and delightfully amiable staff to welcome you. Our bedroom is stunning, with heavy taffeta curtains, ornate mirrors and, without hyperbole, literally the world's most comfortable bed.

**8.30pm:** Travel tiredness makes inhouse restaurant Eight an ideal dinner destination. I had heard exciting things, but no breathless accounts quite prepare us for its buffet. Staff manage stations where exquisite, freshly made food awaits your discerning tastebuds. be it the sushi bar.

fresh oysters or steak cooked in front of you. Surprisingly, the salad bar captures my heart most – I think it's the near-shocking

luxury of pouring as much pistachio oil as I want over my chosen leaves and accoutrements. Such sweeping range can't guarantee perfection – the pretzels are a little tough, the roast potatoes cold and the beer range oddly small – but generally the deliciousness is astounding. Oh, and there's a chocolate fountain. Let that thought sink in. Replete, drunk with fullness, we lurch back to our room to lie prostrate in front of some pleasingly mindless television.

**Saturday, 8am:** Eight does breakfast too – not quite the supercharged thrill of dinner, but a fine feed by any standards,

especially when there's someone dedicated to making you waffles and the chocolate fountain is still running.

**9am:** Always on the prowl for coffee, Tim and I grab two reliably fantastic Coffee Supreme cold drips from their Douglas St cafe. A more elegant process than the name would suggest, cold drip is an icy, silky-textured brew.

**10am:** We drive northwards to the Matakana Markets. It's deeply sunny, and every other patron has an enchantingly tiny dog. Luscious local produce is sold here, from Matakana Olive Co-op Ltd oils to Matakana gourmet nut butters. There are bites small and large to grab for lunch, a blues band playing, and the whole operation, despite being busy, maintains a distinct serenity because of its proximity to the

river. Tim and I buy some Sawmill Brewing Company beers for another time, and then head on our way.

**11.30am:** Morris and James pottery has been a Matakana fixture for years. During a free backstage tour we learn all aspects of the onsite creation of their wares – from the harvesting of the local clay to firing the pottery in an imposingly enormous kiln, where pale-green pots will turn the richest orange under its heat. Astonishingly good value, there are items small and large for sale on site, all in Morris and James' signature opulent, vivid style.

**1pm:** Tim and I get lost, but the views in this neck of the woods are breathtaking. We finally arrive at Brick Bay Winery, rising above a lily-pad-strewn lake. Its high ceilings and huge windows are just the thing to clear our heads. Even better is a glass of their softly luscious raspberry-tinted rose. No mere winery, it also has an ever-changing sculpture trail to ramble around. The grounds are glorious and around every corner is a sculpture so arresting – from tiny lambs adorably decked in sweaters to a gloriously shiny, angular structure rising up from the bush – that the occasionally uphill climb is barely noticed.

**7.30pm:** Even I recall Britomart being fairly nondescript, but the overhauled precinct is justifiably attracting new attention. With bars, from the elegant to the rowdy, high-end shopping and





the transport centre, it's an easy place to spend a lot of time. Cafe Hanoi can alleviate the stress of showing up at a popular, buzzy restaurant, taking down your number to call you when there's a free table. The system works and after a drink at the lovely Agents and Merchants cafe and bar, Tim and I are sitting at Hanoi's bar, with a glimpse into its impossibly fast-moving kitchen. We share cinnamon-rich pork belly and poached chicken, green papaya and peanut salad, both wildly good and surprisingly filling. Don't pass by the cocktails – the cassis and Frangelico in my “Cry me a Mekong” are a bewitching combination.

**Sunday, 9am:** After waffles at Eight, Tim and I drive downtown to catch the ferry to Rangitoto Island. I recommend ensconcing yourself downstairs on the ferry, where it's warm and the seats are comfortable.

**10am:** Borne from a series of eruptions, Rangitoto Island wears its history like a cloak, in the form of thousands of volcanic rocks, brutally sharp and dull grey in colour, while also providing a home to thousands of native plants like pohutukawa. This is not the pastime I'd normally seek – not being particularly into nature – but our driver is affably knowledgeable and the drive is infinitely preferable to walking. The final climb to the top is about 2 kilometres there and back, up a considerable hill, but the panoramic views of Auckland city are gorgeous.

**1.30pm:** Back on the mainland, lunch at Wynyard Quarter means exploring a whole new area. This end of the waterfront has been revitalised to host bars, restaurants, public spaces, art and the Wynyard Crossing, the bridge across which you can happily walk, but which will occasionally split open to accommodate a passing boat. Lunch is at Marvel

Grill, where Tim and I are near-staggered by the choices – from small plates, to burgers, to market fish and prime meat. I thoroughly recommend a selection of the small plates if indecision plagues

you. Our particular favourites are crisp, salty zucchini fritters with soft, tangy whipped feta, dissolving pork belly with apple slaw, and scalloped potatoes, which taste like good cream and butter, and plenty thereof.

**3.30pm:** Traffic tends towards the intense here and driving up Queen St feels endless. We finally arrive at the Auckland Art Gallery. It's had a refit since I last visited, giving it a cool, airy, international feeling. We have just enough time for a quick reconnaissance at Who Shot Rock'n'Roll, an exhibition from the United States cataloguing more than 170 images from modern music. With album covers, live photography, intimate moments, from Buddy Holly to M.I.A., it's a brilliant, compelling collection, and there are several dates featuring live acts, DJs and guest speakers between now and February. With said traffic plus a contrary GPS, Tim and I very nearly – but fortunately do not – miss our flight back to Wellington. If this were to force us into a longer than intended stay, however, we would indubitably find myriad exciting ways to fill our time. Auckland: I pronounce my rose-tinted glasses remain.

**Laura Vincent visited Auckland courtesy of Auckland Tourism Events and Economic Development.**

**TO THE ISLAND/** Weekending on Waiheke, E11.

**Rangitoto Island wears its history like a cloak, in the form of thousands of volcanic rocks.**

## Fact file

### Where to stay:

The Langham, 83 Symonds St, ph 09 379 5132, auckland.langhamhotels.co.nz. Impossibly luxurious and handily walkable to downtown Auckland. Apparently its Chuan spa is rather exemplary, but even just hanging out in your own room is delightful.

### Where to eat:

Eight at the Langham, 83 Symonds St, ph 09 300 2924, auckland.langhamhotels.co.nz. Matakana Village Farmers' Market, 2 Matakana Valley Rd, ph 021 1414 308, matakनावillage.co.nz. Brick Bay Winery, Arabella Lane, Snells Beach, ph 09 425 4690, brickbay.co.nz.

Agents and Merchants, 50 Custom St East, ph 09 309 5854, agentsandmerchants.co.nz. Cafe Hanoi, cnr Galway and Commerce streets, ph 09 302 3478, cafehanoi.co.nz.

Marvel Grill, 34-47 Jellicoe St, North Wharf, Wynyard Quarter, ph 09 377 8828, marvelgrill.co.nz.

### What to do:

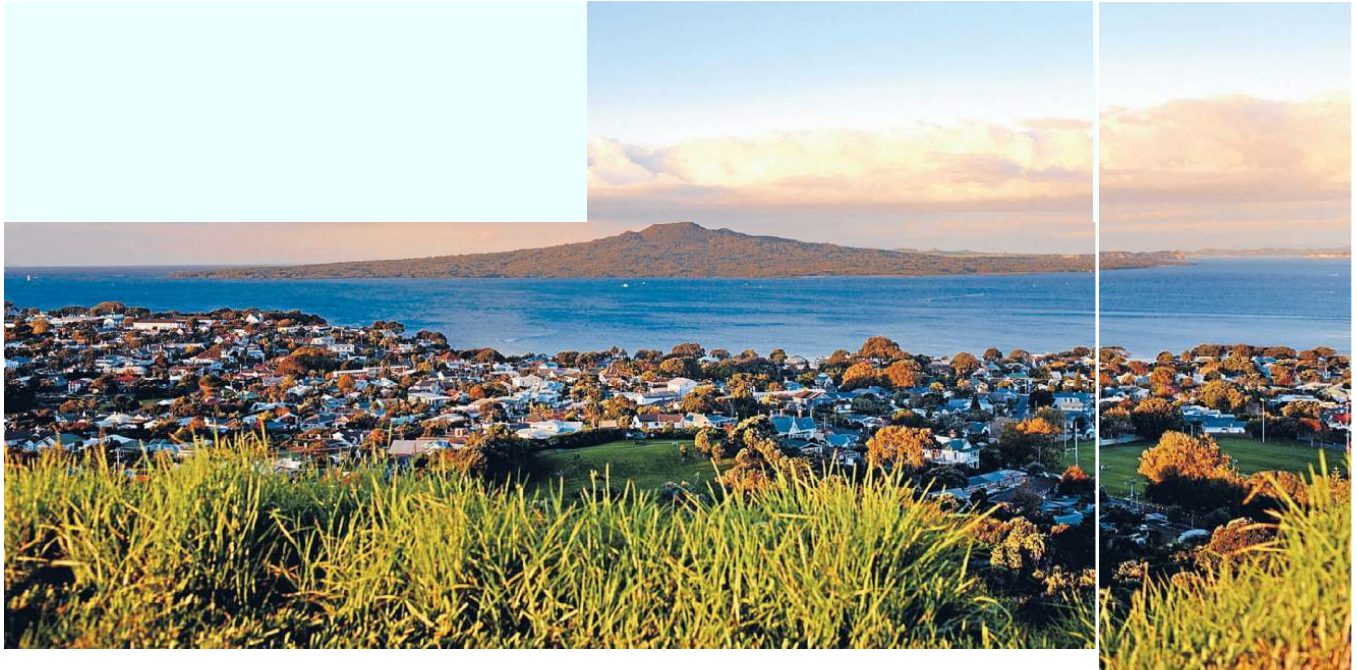
Aucklandnz.com will have plenty of ideas. Pick up treasures in Matakana, wander around the shops at the Britomart Precinct, check out what's showing at The Civic Theatre or Aotea Centre, and make sure you spend more time at the art gallery than we did.



**Second life:** Britomart, in downtown Auckland, is now much more than a transport centre. Photo: ATEED

**No breathless accounts quite prepare us for Eight's buffet.**





**Scene stealers: the glorious Rangitoto Island, above, and below, the buzzy and bewitching Cafe Hanoi.** Photos: ATEED