



By Brtia Marti

The Bay of Islands Walking Weekend

Papatūānuku Earth Mother Tours in the Opuā Forest

This walk is new to the Bay of Islands Walking Weekend and is incredibly special and really brings home where we come from and what is important in life.

Manakitanga, Kaitiakitanga, whanaungatanga may be mouthfuls of Maori words for some but by the end of the tour Stella will have not only explained these concepts but even better - you will have felt them.

Many bush walks in New Zealand have the disadvantage of being a long way from anywhere and long gravel road access. With this walk you won't even notice this as the travel time is used for you to become a group of friends and also join the NZ bird family - whanaungatanga is this wonderful concept of gaining a family style connection through shared experiences. This isn't the usual - 'tell us your name' introduction - Stella chooses a card introducing your bird for the day and I was very happy to be the kereru - NZ pigeon and I enjoyed sharing its Northland name of kukupo my new family members. Then there is even more as, on arrival at the start of the walk we were given walking sticks - taiaha to use for the day, with our own bird carved on it. The taiaha belong to Ngahere Toa, a group of young people that Stella and friends have taken under their wing and are teaching about the forest. They come on each tour with Stella as we carry their taiaha - more very special whanaungatanga!! - and manakitanga - the concept of welcoming and sharing / hospitality

Before the start of the walk everyone cleaned the boots by walking on a special pad with disinfectant to help reduce the risk of spreading kauri die back the nasty disease affecting these giants of the forests. This is a small way to understand kaitiakitanga - guardianship of our environment.

And then we were off to spend some time in Opuia Forest on track off Oromahoe Road starting about 6 kms from the Opuia turn off. After a karakia to show our respects to the forest we felt very much welcomed into the surrounding of bush and as we walked along all of us were noticing the larger trees and also all the smaller plants along the path. Every few minutes we stopped and Stella introduced us to a forest taonga (treasure) with a story - eg; the tall tanekaha trees whose bark was used as a red dye, nae nae leaves for waterproof cloaks (korowai) long before feathers were used, totara for waka which were usually build in smaller sections so that they could be taken apart for overland travel, the very hard puriri trees which are often hollow inside and used a burial place for human bones in early days, plants used for healing teas and poultices. All these stories encouraged us all to look all around us as we walked and discover our own treasures to share with each other.

As we walked we saw many kauri trees and marvelled at the amazing bark patterns but realised these were just babies when we came to see the large kauri at the end of the track - all alone - which is why Stella has named it We were in awe and all stood for a while in silence which was peaceful until we realised there was very little birdsong and actually none of our family of birds were close by. We had a good discussion about why this is - sadly too many predators - stoat, rats, possum, feral cats BUT Stella played some magic tunes with her Pūtōrino (Maori flute)- stunningly beautiful - and amazingly, a few birds responded with their own songs.

A few steps away from our forest giant we had a more sad experience as we learnt about the great work of Bay Bush Action and the Junior Team Ngahere Toa in their efforts to rid the forest of these introduced predators. We were shown the different types of trap and bait for each and the reasons for the choices. The traps used all give the least suffering possible for the victims but they have to be eliminated for the native birdlife and plants to survive.

It was a quieter return walk as we all reflected on what we had experienced. It was an honour to have carried our taiaha and brought our special manu (bird) with us but hope next time it will be a real bird rather than a carved one.

We were then all ready to enjoy more manakitanga as Stella produced home made Maori fry bread with butter and Manuka / bush honey from hives within the forest (for sale too) and herbal / fruit tea.

After this walking experience a great option is to walk from the road back to Paihia through more of the Opuia forest - about 1.5 hours and really enjoy the bush with fresh eyes.

There are over 18 walks to choose from on the Bay of Islands Walking Weekend, all different price ranges and experiences. An hour to all day and over night trips. Trips over private land only accessible in the weekend. Boat trips to beautiful untouched walking spots. You can visit vineyards for the ultimate walk and wine experience, sit on the end of the wharf at one of the best eateries in the Bay enjoying lunch after walking to a stunning view point, have a sunrise breakfast with the locals or simply kick back over some homemade whitebait fritters at the weekend Headquarters. The one thing we can say - is that people return year after year - that must be telling you something! The weekend is on the 12, 13, 14th October. Visit the website www.boiwalkingweekend.co.nz or call Steph 021 122 9307 for more information.