



Because it's so...
UNIQUE

Maori magic

A personal encounter with New Zealand's pioneers leaves **Norman Miller** starstruck

The wind is blowing strong at the summit of Te Mata, Hawke's Bay's highest peak, but the words being spoken by Robert MacDonald cut through, weighted with the wisdom and authority only a Maori tribal elder can impart.

Robert is the keeper of the history of the Ngati Kurukuru tribe in this part of New Zealand, and the tales he's telling make *Game of Thrones* plotlines sound tame. I particularly like the story of Ruauomoko, the god of volcanoes and earthquakes, who fought and defeated the water monster, Parata, casting him into the glittering blue bay far below, where he still seethes, awaiting a rematch.

There are human dramas, too, including talk of lusty Maori chiefs getting into risqué dalliances and triggering inter-tribal dust-ups.

It was for this evocative (and occasionally salacious) sense of intimacy that I signed up for the *A Day in the Life of a Maori Elder* tour in the first place. Yes, in nearby Rotorua, you'll find Maori tourist performances that are quicker, cheaper and easier to come by, but on this excursion, I'm getting the chance to delve deep into the culture that feels a universe away from the usual photo ops and haka stare-off.

While the summit of Te Mata marks the literal high point of this tour, emotions peak throughout a day of humbling, but far from

Out of this world: the Milky Way seen from North Island; Maori craftsmanship; the traditional Maori hongi greeting; Waimarama Beach

humdrum, moments. From discovering the secret locations of carved totem poles to standing on the banks of a sacred eel pond – a swirling larder that has fed Robert's people for years – it feels as if we have been given a backstage pass to a world rarely seen by outsiders. Later, Robert invites us into his home to share lunch and listen to Maori music beneath the gaze of family portraits, ancestral DNA rendered in memorably tattooed mugshots.

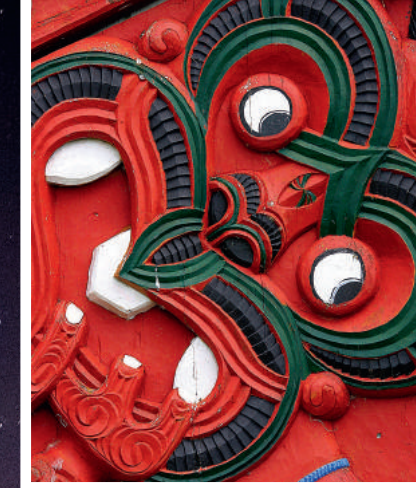
But the starting point for this outing is the beach – specifically, the idyllic Waimarama strand, where around 700 years ago, the *waka* (ocean-crossing canoe) of Robert's ancestors slid up onto the soft white sands, having crossed the vast

Pacific from eastern archipelagos such as Hawaii and Tahiti.

My reverence at their crossing of the world's most immense ocean, using the stars alone as a guide, gets a firmer foothold at Hakikino. Here, high on a grassy plateau knoll, encircled by a panorama of sea, mountains and sky, is New Zealand's oldest observatory – one unlike any other stargazing site on Earth. Rather than white-coated astronomers, telescopes and giant metallic domes, vast monolithic stones jutting out of the ground form a ring, at the heart of which lies a *maramataka* – an ancient Maori celestial chart. To the learned eye, this allows one to track the phases of the Moon in line with the shifting pattern of stars and

planets in the southern night sky. It's where Robert's predecessors, stretching back generations as far as the 14th century, would pass on the skills that allowed them to make that epic journey to the Land of the Long White Cloud.

'Reading the stars keeps our history alive – it is part of who we are,' says Robert. This site, known as *Te Koripitanga o Tama-nui-te-Ra* – the place where the stars and the sun rise from the sea – is here to bring people like me a little closer to the inner life of the Maori. I'm just thankful that today you don't need a star map to get here. *A Day in the Life of a Maori Elder* tour costs £297pp, including lunch (6hr; waimaramamaori.com).



Four more Maori moments

1 FOOD FOR THOUGHT, NORTH ISLAND

Join Maori master chef Charles Royal on a tailor-made food exploration into pristine native bush, where he'll introduce you to New Zealand's unique natural larder. Forage for *horopito* (Maori pepper), tasty *pikopiko* (ferns) and *kawakawa* (bush basil), then cook up an alfresco Maori feast beside an idyllic lake (kinakinz.com; tours from £137pp).

3 LAKE LORE, NORTH ISLAND

Towering above Lake Taupo, the giant Mine Bay Maori rock carving of Ngatoroirangi is an extraordinary contemporary Maori artwork. But to see carver Matahi Whakataka-Brightwell's unforgettable vision, you need to take to the water – by yacht, cruiser or kayak – for an art tour with a difference (viator.com; from £137pp).

2 NATURE TRAIL, NORTH ISLAND

Learn about the Maoris' cultural connection with nature amid the giant trees and thriving birdlife of Otanewainuku Forest on an inspiring, exclusive day tour to the private woodland studio of contemporary Maori sculptor Todd Couper. You'll hear how his native culture informs his distinctive art (newzealand-indepth.co.uk; from £1,100 for up to six people).

4 CITY SPIRIT, NORTH ISLAND

Auckland's dormant volcano Mount Eden has a Maori name too, Maungawhau. Ascend its green slopes and terraces with a tribal *kaiarahi* (guide), hearing stories of this former *pa* (Maori stronghold). Then marvel at views over the city's majestic natural harbours to the island volcano Rangitoto (tamakihiko.co.nz; from £27pp). *Norman Miller*

