

Around New Zealand »

Donna McIntyre ties her laces and gatecrashes a group of women on a weekend stroll

I feel like we've gatecrashed this wonderful group of women who have known each other for 23 years and have come to Whangarei Heads for their annual weekend away.

The "Plunket playgroup mums" are a great bunch to randomly share a lodge and a weekend of walks with. There's so much laughter and fun, something we hadn't expected when we'd signed up to stay at the Bream Heads Coast Walks lodge on the northeastern slopes of the Mt Manaia range.

We had driven up from Auckland, doing our best to arrive before dusk but we needn't have worried about getting lost. Lodge owner and Coast Walks organiser Claire Pearson's directions are incredibly clear and her distinctive sign at the driveway entrance is easy to spot.

Inside the lodge, the group of seven — who met in 1989 when their babies were part of a St Heliers playgroup — have been playing a guessing game. Who would their two housemates be? I feel obliged to say I'm writing a piece for *Herald Travel*, which kind of ruins the game but at least they're informed.

Sure, we're here to do some walks but it's also a bit of a pampering weekend. All meals: cereal, fruit or toast and eggs for breakfast, everything we need to make a healthy packed lunch and, on our return from the day of walking, post-walk nibbles and a meal prepped and ready to pop in the oven or on the barbecue plus vegetables or salads, are all sorted.

That's worth coming to Whangarei Heads for on its own.

My husband has gone rather quiet on learning he's sharing his weekend with eight gorgeous women (that's including me, of course). Yep, it might be his fantasy, but in reality it's a lot of oestrogen under one roof (even though we're all either side of 50 so the oestrogen factor isn't as strong as it might have been a decade ago).

We learn, too, that women make up the majority of Claire's customers. She's a keen walker and after doing walks around New Zealand, including the Tora Coastal Walk in southern Wairarapa, she decided to start a business with husband Mark offering walks close to home, which would appeal to like-minded people. Some of the trails are challenging so you need a certain standard of fitness. But Claire also knows what women like: a comfortable bed, not sharing a bedroom with someone you don't know, you're happy to bring your own duvet and towel but after a day out walking you want to know there is a hot shower or bath waiting for you and a meal that makes all that physical effort worthwhile. No TV or wi-fi either, which is refreshing. You have to have to mix and mingle with people in the same room rather than finding them on social media. And socialising is no problem with the company

Wander women



Ocean Beach offers stunning views; our company for the walk (below). Pictures / Supplied; Donna McIntyre



Checklist

BREAM HEAD COAST WALKS

DETAILS

The walks experience runs Oct 1-May 31 but the lodge is also available off-season for hire. It sleeps up to 14 but Claire limits walking groups to 12 and makes sure strangers aren't sharing rooms. There are three bedrooms, one bunkroom and three bathrooms (plus an outdoor bath). The walks especially appeal to women, and 50s and 60s are the most common age groups. Walks range from easy strolls through to challenging.

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we are blessed with. I'm impressed by this friendship enduring three decades.

Day one's walk is first through the kiwi track before the house, then along the road and then via farmland tracks out to the wide open spaces of white-sanded Ocean Beach and its stunning views. We take not one but two swims along the way and then Claire, bless her heart, collects us in her van to take us to home base where freshly baked cookies are waiting for us (normal and gluten-free).

Our evening meal is barbecued rump steak, three freshly made salads and cherry clafoutis for dessert. And that follows our post-walk, gluten-free lemon cake, steaming cups of hot coffee and then pre-meal lentil koftas and savoury eggs nibbles.

That night seven out of our nine wander along the trail up to the listening post for kiwi. That's after our new friends have tried to cram as many people as possible into the outside bathtub, amid much hilarity. Now, huddled together at the kiwi listening post, we can't believe our luck when after only five minutes we hear a male and then a female. Too good to be true. When we get back to the house, my husband and another tired walker, ask how we went. We report our experience. Husband later confesses with glee they had played the bird songs CD full volume on the deck and those were the kiwi sounds we had heard. Thought it was too good to be true.

But, hey, we did see a morepork.

Next morning we're all fresh as daisies and we scoff down brekky, make our lunches and climb in the van for a lift to today's walk, the much more challenging Bream Head tracks system as far as Urquharts Bay and Peach Cove.

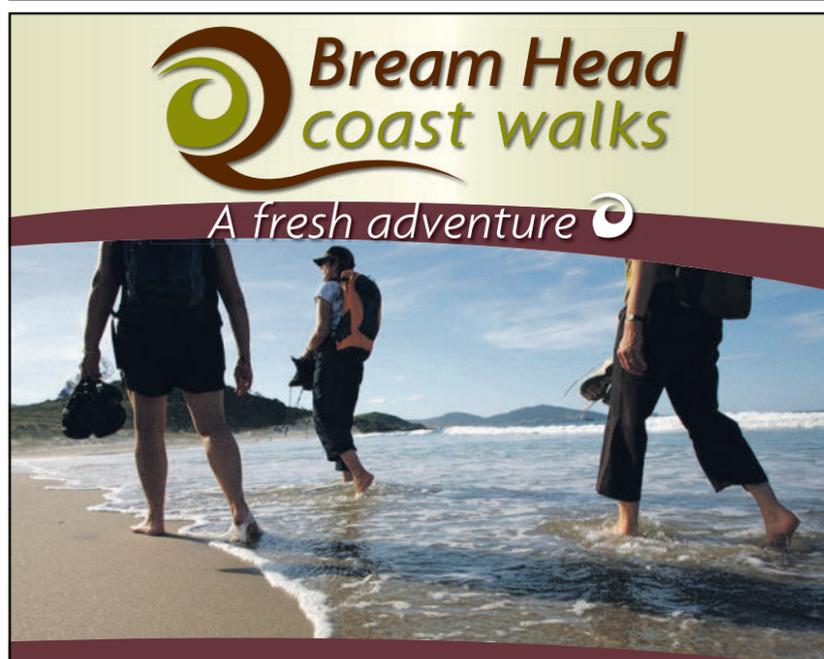
Wow, this is where you need to have pumped up the fitness to cope with the steady climb required on this walk. It's not for the faint-hearted nor the unfit and I wish I had bought sturdy tramping boots as I clamber

over slippery tree roots and rocks.

I stay with the group that calls it a day halfway when the rain changes from steady drizzle to downpour. The others unleash their competitive streaks and forge on through the rest of the challenging climb. They endure a steady downpour and return to the lodge soaking wet but sporting huge adrenalin-surged smiles.

This is our last afternoon and we're surprised how sad we are to leave our new friends, who stay on to walk around Busby Head on the Monday. We're rather envious of the meal that awaits them, too, as we head to Auckland with a packet of chips to share in the car.

"Join us again next year when we pick another walk again," they say. Maybe they're just being nice. But we kind of like these walking weekends. We might just have to gatecrash the group again next year.



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