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Gisborne: New Zealand's most underrated holiday spot

Brook Sabin 10:50, Dec 28 2018

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Here are seven reasons to put the East Cape on your new year bucket list.

I'm sitting at the top of one of New Zealand's great natural wonders, in an inflatable tyre. I like to think I'm brave, but at moments like these, I have a Mr Bean complex.

I'm about to head down the Rere Rockslide, a 60-metre naturally-formed chute that has given Gisborne plenty of attention all over the world. You're meant to just lie flat on the tyre, and enjoy the ride. But instead, I look like some kind of over-anxious octopus using every limb to stabilise myself.



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Close to the Rere Rockslide, you'll find the beautiful Rere Falls

While the rockslide has got millions of views in viral videos, we discovered there is so much more to Gisborne that makes it one of most underrated tourist destinations in New Zealand. So here are seven reasons to put the East Cape on your new year bucket list.

1. The coolest rail adventure in New Zealand



THE GISBORNE RAIL BIKE ADVENTURE

It's hoped rail biking will eventually attract 35,000 people to the region each year.

Have you ever heard of rail biking? This genius idea - officially launched last week after 8 years of planning - will put Gisborne on the map. The world-first design sees two push bikes fused together on a rail line, with a steel chassis holding them in place. All you need to do is pedal; there's no steering and you can't fall off.

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The creator behind it, Geoff Main, is using an old section of the Gisborne to Napier rail line to provide the tours, which includes passing over bridges and through a 1.5-kilometre tunnel. It's a rail experience unlike anything around the world, and there are bold plans for it to become a multi-day adventure that will eventually rival the Otago Rail Trail.

2. Experience Gisborne's 'swimming labradors'



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Gisborne is the only place in New Zealand to offer a wild stingray feeding tour.

Feeding stingrays may sound a little daunting, but the experience was so uplifting - it felt like we were interacting with a group of friendly swimming labradors.

The feeding takes place at Tatapouri, about 20 minutes outside Gisborne. Guides will walk you out onto the reef, where the rays will slowly gather around, then the feeding begins. Rays have got a

bad rap since the death of Steve Irwin, but as we found out they are so gentle they even have manners - coming up to your gumboot and nudging politely for more food.

One of them is even called Pancake - how can you not like that? You're also likely to see eagle rays - the elegant ballerinas of the sea - and kingfish hovering around for food too.

3. Get back to nature



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The Manutuke Eco Retreat comes complete with its own lake.

Gisborne now has a luxury glamping option that opened less than a month ago and it's found 15 minutes outside the city. Manutuke Eco Retreat is set on a huge farm, overlooking its own lake. The camp can fit up to four adults in two lavishly appointed tents. There's even your own jetty, where you can go kayaking and paddleboarding.



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The Manutuke Eco Retreat has an outdoor bathtub for stargazing.

The site is off-grid, but there is solar power lighting. Take a mountain bike and explore the hills around the lake, where you'll find giant hammocks dotted around - it's almost like a treasure hunt (the treasure being relaxation).

The biggest hammock is more than 20 feet long on a hill overlooking the city and beaches, where you can be the first in the world to watch the sunrise (Gisborne is the most eastern city in the world).



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You'll find hidden hammocks around the Manutuke Eco Retreat where you can watch the sunrise over Gisborne.

4. Learn about the first waka to visit New Zealand



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Tairāwhiti Voyaging Trust launched the waka replica last year, and will eventually do sailing tours

This really was an unexpected delight: step aboard a recreation of one of the first waka to reach New Zealand and learn how the early Māori navigated their way around the Pacific triangle to find Aotearoa. You'll learn from the legendary Te Aturangi Nepia-Clamp, who has taken 25 voyages all over the Pacific in the waka - using only traditional navigation.

This fascinating insight made me feel a little guilty; I knew so little about how early Māori navigated the world. As part of the Waka Cultural Experience, Nepia-Clamp will pepper his talk with his own experiences sailing in the waka - including when he got caught in 100-foot waves.

5. The golden coast



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Gisborne is home to several beautiful beaches and some of the best surf breaks in the country.

The surf breaks are so good in this part of the world, they're officially protected. That means no development can happen onshore that'll impact how the waves form. With a beach right in town, it's the perfect place to learn to surf - we were up standing within 15 minutes!

6. Wine not



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With more than half a dozen cellar doors around Gisborne, you'll want to spend the day vineyard hopping.

Gisborne is home to a stunning mix of boutique wineries, which includes the first biodynamic vineyard in New Zealand (this goes one step further than organic, and is a method that replenishes the soil and vine while the grapes grow).

Millton vineyard is an organic pioneer, and offers a free wine tasting at its cellar door. These wines are revered around the world, and often travel thousands of kilometres to be consumed - so it's pretty special to taste them just a few metres from where they were produced. Another excellent stop is a tasting session at The Sunshine Brewery's taproom, it is the oldest independent brewer in the country and somewhat of an institution locally.

7. Gisborne's biggest thrill - Rere Rockslide



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Rere Rockslide is smooth to slide down, with a splash landing swimming hole at the bottom.

This natural rock slide is a must-do when visiting the region. It's ginormous, one of the largest in the world, and like me - you may find it a little daunting at first. But take a bodyboard or tyre tube, hold on tight, and you can't go wrong. This is probably the most fun you can have without paying a cent.



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The Rere Rockslide gets very busy in the summer, so head there early to be the first one down.

More information: The Gisborne Rail Bike Adventure starts from \$120 per person, per day. See: railbikes.nz

Manutuke Eco Retreat is Gisborne's newest glamping escape. Prices start from \$280 per night. See: canopycamping.co.nz

The Waka Cultural Experience can be booked through the Gisborne iSite and costs \$50 for adults and \$25 for children.

Getting there: Gisborne is a 6.5 hour road trip from Auckland, or 4 hours from Rotorua. Air New Zealand also offers several flights a day from Auckland and Wellington.

Staying there: Dive Tatapouri runs stingray feeding at low tide. It's \$55 and \$20 for children. See: divetatapouri.com

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