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The Ara Roa guest house overlooks hills, ocean, estuary and islands.

Anchored in a quiet bay

14.02.2004

By WAYNE THOMPSON

The castle-like peaks of the Whangarei Heads stand out in a big bay of blue sea as you drop down the Brynderwyns on the main highway to Northland.

But the highway sidesteps the Heads when you reach Whangarei City, taking most visitors away from a pleasant and interesting area that's ripe for the weekend at only two-and-a-bit hours from Auckland.

The Heads and its open beaches and secluded bays offer a quieter alternative to the popular resort spots farther north such as Tutukaka and Matapouri.

A first-time Heads visitor, whose usual retreat is Waiheke Island, sums the place up for me: "It's a backwater - but a nice backwater."

A 35km road winds along the heads from the city to Bream Head Scenic Reserve and ocean beaches. On the way, it presents bays such as McLeod's and Urquhart's, which offer safe swimming and picnics under the pohutukawa trees.

Walkers love the Bream peninsula for its views out to the islands and the fair chance of being alone, in silence, on a small, white sandy beach like Smuggler's Cove or Peach Cove.

Energetic folk have a choice of two hills for a good workout: Bream Head rising to 488m and Mt Manaia to 460m, through bush to a rock chimney and breathtaking views.

They look down on a harbour that keeps fisherfolk and kayak paddlers enthralled for hours, and an 18-hole golf course.

The area has a broad range of places to stay, including a dozen bed and breakfast establishments.

Dining possibilities, however, are limited compared to other northern resorts, not that that affected us.

Typical weary Aucklanders come Friday nights, Susie and I decided against eating out. We brought our own food, topping up the chilly bin at the Onerahi supermarket, which was handily on

the way.

We were bound for the northern or non harbour side of the Heads - to the backwater inlets of Pataua and Taiharuru.

It's a relatively untouched spot, with the sea-cliff mansion of former Tourism Minister Murray McCully being the most conspicuous development.

At the end of a steep 1.4km private road up the side of Kauri Mountain, we found the Olsen's farmlet.

In former working lives, Susanne and Paul Olsen were 12 years overseas in the superyacht industry, catering for the demands of the rich and famous.

The couple, she a Dane and he a New Zealander, were finely tuned in to what jaded tycoons wanted - quality and privacy.

But they preferred to hear the pitter-patter of little feet to the shuffle of Gucci on teak decks.

Their thoughts turned to a place up north where as a boy, Paul learned to handle a boat and a fishing rod.

On an 18ha block, 30km east of Whangarei, they built a home and later, on a bushy paddock farther up the mountain side, a two-bedroom guest house, they call Ara Roa.

This was, for two nights, our superyacht, lying snugly at anchor as we surveyed from the "bridge" ... er the kitchen, a procession of rain squalls sweeping across valley and ocean.

Spacious rooms and barbecue decks overlooked farms, a gentle estuary, surf-fringed coast and islands floating in a blue haze.

When the rain came and enveloped the house in mist, we retreated to the bathroom. It had a huge bath set beside a glass wall facing the bush reserve.

Tui and fantail and perhaps even an early-start kiwi stared back at us as we soaked and relaxed. Bare feet greeted the rare luxury of bach living - underfloor heating.

The kitchen was better equipped in terms of quality and range than one finds in most homes. Top-notch knives, recipe books, baking tins and a nutmeg grater showed the hosts' thoughtfulness.

Ara Roa is set up to sleep six and with its bedrooms separated by the living area and bathroom, would work comfortably for a family or two couples.

When they built the guest house, the Olsens chose top quality appliances, fittings and furnishings, so everything would stay fresh and shipshape.

At the same time, they did not want high standards to mean hire rates that would scare off New Zealanders.

Privacy and views are blue-chip virtues of Ara Roa and it's nice you don't need to be in the superyacht league to experience them.

Demand for upmarket accommodation is hotting up in the area and the Olsens have added to their jobs the management of the "Cliffhouse", which is a contemporary home set up for self-catering guests at \$300 a night.

Susanne says you can watch the dolphins and whales from the kitchen sink.

* Wayne Thompson stayed as a guest of [Ara Roa](#)

WHERE TO FIND IT

Ara Roa, Harambee Rd, Onerahi, Whangarei. It's just over two hours' drive from Auckland. Host gives simple, accurate directions. Ph (09) 436 5028, fax (09) 436 5028, email pvista@xtra.co.nz

WHAT IT COSTS

Single party bookings only. Year-round, couples \$175 a night; extra two persons \$45 each. Two couples pay a total of \$265 a night. Children are charged as extra persons unless in a portable

cot.

SMOKING

Outside on the decks

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS

No Children Welcome (The Olsens' children are 3 and 6, and sociable.)

PETS

No. This is a kiwi zone.

FOOD

Fully equipped kitchen for self-catering but hosts can provide simple dinners. Fresh green salads are a speciality, delivered to your door at \$30-\$40 each. Alternatively, the Top Sail Restaurant, Beach Rd, Onerahi, is open for dinner Tuesday-Saturday and brunch/lunch on Sunday.

WHAT TO DO

On-site bush and farm walks.

A mountain bike is available and two kayaks for guests can be taken to river or beach spots for you.

Cockle-gathering at recommended spots.

Local coastal walks range from 15 minutes to six hours.

Fishing and diving off local beaches or charter vessels.

Slow drives with coastal views and plenty of photo stops.

Surfing, golfing.

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