

# Lake Waikaremoana

The Lake Waikaremoana track will give you a taste of an area Katherine Mansfield called "passionately secret".

That the beauty of Lake Waikaremoana affects people in a profound way becomes apparent very early in conversation with the Department of Conservation's Jane Hughes, who is based on the lake's shore at Aniwanuiwa. Originally from England, Hughes was travelling around the North Island in 1991 when she stopped in at a pub to ask directions. "We were standing in this misty car park and this person was talking. Out of the mist I could hardly see his face. He said, 'Waikaremoana, you're going there? You'll come face-to-face with yourself.'" It wasn't until she spent time around the lake she realised the wisdom of this mystery mist-shrouded man. "It is really quite true. It's a very good place to get to know yourself. I love the way you can get lost in your world – well, in a whole different world; your outside life just fades away when you're walking around."

Deep in Te Urewera National Park, the Lake Waikaremoana track runs for 46km between Hopuruahine and Onepoto, following the lake's edge, and winding up into the surrounding hills. Te Urewera is, of course, the spiritual home of the Tuhoe iwi, and it is perhaps this that is the catalyst for the connection that people, Maori and Pakeha, can't help but forge with the area. "It's a very spiritual place," says Lance Winitana, Chairman of Tuhoe te Mana Motuhake Mai Waikaremoana. "It's home, it's life. Te Urewera is very special to us, the Tuhoe people."

On one of those occasions when the track leaves the lake's edge, it does so to lead trampers up Panekire Bluff. It's a special area, Winitana says. The bluff rises dramatically from the rainforest, bare in places where plants are unable to find a foothold on the rock face. From the top, it offers unimpeded views of Waikaremoana, "the sea of rippling waters". "If it's misty and rainy you've got the sort of water-colour effect of peninsulas appearing out of the mist, and if it's a calm and sunny day, that's quite stunning, too. There's a soothing quality to the water," says Hughes. It all makes for one of the hike's most spectacular spots. "The first time I walked up Panekire it felt almost like a pilgrimage to the top. There's a feeling of

sacredness and a real connection to something very, very beautiful and deep."

The surrounding ancient rainforest, too, is full of delights, and is the home of incredible biodiversity, with more than 650 native species. "It's just incredible as you're walking around," Hughes says. "You've got native beech forest and huge rimu rising. It's incredible how abundant it is. It's like a feast everywhere you look. And all your senses: the smell, the sound." One of which will be kiwi calling: the Puketukutuku Peninsula has been the subject of extensive predator control thanks to the Lake Waikaremoana Hapu Restoration Trust, and is now home to a burgeoning kiwi population.

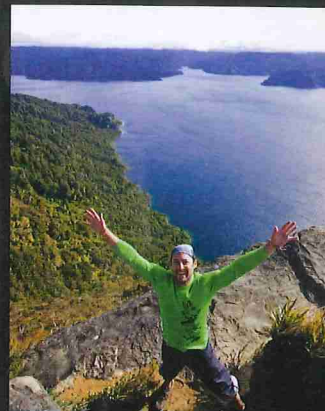
The track can be tackled from either end, but Hughes recommends starting out at Hopuruahine on the lake's northern shore, leaving the ascent of Panekire Bluff to the last day when your pack is a bit lighter. It's generally gentle – Panekire Bluff is the only significant climb – but moderate fitness is required. As is the right equipment; it can snow in winter, and people have been caught out before. October to April is the most popular time to walk the track, and is when you can take most advantage of the pristine beaches that hem the water. During this time, it's essential to book your campsites or hut berths well in advance.

"It's all so gigantic and tragic – even in the bright sunlight it is so passionately secret," is how Katherine Mansfield described Te Urewera early last century. Nothing has changed. Over the three or four days it takes to walk the Lake Waikaremoana track, you'll get a little sense of that secret, and also of the happiness the place instils. As Hughes says, "I drive to work every morning and I'm amazed at what a stunning, beautiful place it is, and how very, very lucky I am to be here." For more information see

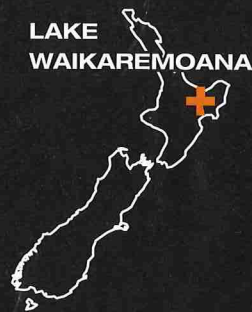
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This page from top: The view from Panekire Bluff; both huts and campsites are available; the lake's edge.