

FIFTY AND FAR AFIELD



Your North Island New Zealand Itinerary

THE COMPLETE ROAD TRIP PLANNER

Ready-made 7, 10 & 14-day loops from Auckland — day-by-day tables,
a booking checklist, budget guide, and a blank planner
to make the route your own.

with Anna

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How to Use This Guide

The North Island packs an enormous range of landscapes into a compact space — white and black sand beaches, geothermal fields, ancient caves, film sets, and a coastline that changes character every few hours of driving. The hard part isn't finding things to do. It's deciding how much time you actually need.

All three routes below are built around the same core loop out of Auckland. Pick the one that matches your timeframe, then use the blank planner near the back of this guide to adjust it to your own trip.

Which Loop Is Right For You?

	7 Days	10 Days	14 Days
Best for	First-time visitors, short on time, still want the highlights	Same core route with breathing room, plus Taranaki	The full loop — Bay of Islands, optional Wellington branch
Distance	826 km	1,084 km	up to 2,100 km
Driving time	~10h 42m	~16h	~23h 35m
Adds to the loop	—	Taranaki detour	Bay of Islands, Napier (optional), Wellington branch

WORTH KNOWING BEFORE YOU START

- Driving times in these tables are estimates only — add time for photo stops, fuel, food, and simply not rushing.
- A standard sedan is fine for every route here. You don't need 4WD.
- Hobbiton, the Waitomo Glowworm Caves boat tour, and Cathedral Cove parking/shuttle all sell out in peak season — see the checklist later in this guide.

ROUTE ONE

7 Days: The Essential Loop

Best for first-time visitors or anyone short on time who still wants to see the North Island's biggest highlights.

Auckland → Coromandel → Hobbiton → Rotorua → Taupō → Waitomo → Auckland

DAY	ROUTE	DRIVING	HIGHLIGHTS
1	Auckland → Coromandel	~3 hrs	Settle in, explore Whitianga or Hahei
2	Coromandel	—	Cathedral Cove, Hot Water Beach
3	Coromandel → Hobbiton → Rotorua	~3.5 hrs	Hobbiton tour, arrive Rotorua evening
4	Rotorua	—	Geothermal parks, Māori cultural experience
5	Rotorua → Taupō	~1 hr	Huka Falls, lakeside walk
6	Taupō → Waitomo	~2 hrs	Glowworm Caves
7	Waitomo → Auckland	~2.5 hrs	Return, flight home or extra Auckland night

WORTH KNOWING

- This is a tight route — Days 3 and 6 involve a stop plus a drive, so leave early.
- Hot Water Beach and Cathedral Cove both depend on tide times — check the night before.
- Short on a full day in Rotorua? Combine the geothermal parks and a Māori cultural evening into one day.

Along the Way

Cathedral Cove, Coromandel

Best early morning before the crowds. Parking fills fast in peak season — consider the shuttle from Hahei, or walk in from town (45 min each way).

Hobbiton, Matamata

Guided tour only, departing from Shire's Rest near Matamata. Around two hours, including a drink at the Green Dragon Inn. Book ahead — slots sell out in peak season.

Rotorua

Te Puia and Wai-O-Tapu are the two most popular geothermal parks, each 20–30 minutes from town. Māori cultural evenings need booking ahead — set schedules, limited capacity.

Waitomo Glowworm Caves

Best on the guided boat tour. Bring a light jacket — the caves stay cool year-round. Photography isn't permitted inside.

ROUTE TWO

10 Days: Extended Loop with Taranaki

Best for travellers who want the same core route as the 7-day loop but with more breathing room, plus a detour south to Taranaki.

Auckland → Coromandel → Hobbiton → Rotorua → Taupō → Taranaki → Waitomo → Auckland

DAY	ROUTE	DRIVING	HIGHLIGHTS
1–2	Auckland → Coromandel	~3 hrs	Cathedral Cove, Hot Water Beach, Whitianga
3	Coromandel → Hobbiton → Rotorua	~3.5 hrs	Hobbiton tour, arrive Rotorua evening
4–5	Rotorua	—	Geothermal parks, Māori cultural experience, mountain biking
6	Rotorua → Taupō	~1 hr	Huka Falls; Tongariro Alpine Crossing optional (add a day)
7–8	Taupō → Taranaki	~2.5 hrs	Mt Taranaki, black sand beaches, surf towns
9	Taranaki → Waitomo	~3 hrs	Glowworm Caves
10	Waitomo → Auckland	~2.5 hrs	Return

Along the Way

Taupō

Huka Falls is an easy, well-signposted stop north of town. A common base for the Tongariro Alpine Crossing, though the track itself starts about an hour's drive away.

Tongariro Alpine Crossing

Needs good weather and a full day — check conditions before you go. It's a one-way track finishing at a different car park, so book a shuttle rather than relying on your own car.

Taranaki & New Plymouth

The Taupō–Taranaki leg is the longest single drive on this route — worth an early start. Taranaki gets more rain and cloud than most of the North Island, so check MetService before you commit to viewpoints.

Plan B for weather

If the Taranaki forecast looks bad and accommodation isn't locked in, Napier and Hawke's Bay on the east coast tend to get more sun.

WORTH KNOWING

- This route works well if you want depth without committing to the full 14-day loop.
- For a deeper dive into Taranaki, see the related posts at the back of this guide.

ROUTE THREE

14 Days: The Full Loop

Best for travellers with the most time and flexibility — includes Bay of Islands in the north, and a decision point near Taranaki depending on whether you're continuing to the South Island.

Auckland → Bay of Islands (Cape Reinga optional) → Auckland (Waiheke optional) → Coromandel → Hobbiton → Rotorua → Taupō → Taranaki → **branch:** Wellington (via Whanganui) *or* Waitomo → Auckland

DAY	ROUTE	DRIVING	HIGHLIGHTS
1–2	Auckland → Bay of Islands	~3.5 hrs	Beaches, photography stops. Cape Reinga optional (add a day)
3	Bay of Islands → Auckland	~3.5 hrs	Waiheke Island optional stop
4–5	Auckland → Coromandel	~3 hrs	Cathedral Cove, Hot Water Beach
6	Coromandel → Hobbiton → Rotorua	~3.5 hrs	Hobbiton tour, arrive Rotorua evening
7–8	Rotorua	—	Geothermal parks, Māori cultural experience, mountain biking
9–10	Rotorua → Taupō	~1 hr	Huka Falls, Tongariro Alpine Crossing optional
11–12	Taupō → Taranaki	~2.5 hrs	Mt Taranaki, black sand beaches, surf towns
13–14	Branch A: Taranaki → Wellington via Whanganui	~4.5 hrs	For those continuing to the South Island
13–14	Branch B: Taranaki → Waitomo → Auckland	~5 hrs	For those staying North Island only

WHICH BRANCH TO TAKE?

- **Continuing to the South Island:** head to Wellington via Whanganui, then take the Cook Strait ferry.
- **Staying North Island only:** loop back through Waitomo for the Glowworm Caves, then finish in Auckland.
- **Optional extension:** Napier & Hawke's Bay — Art Deco architecture and wineries, for extra days or a day traded from elsewhere.

Along the Way

Bay of Islands

Paihia has more accommodation choice and is the easiest base for boat trips; Russell is quieter. Book ahead in summer — one of the busier stops on the route.

Far North / Cape Reinga

Stop at the Te Pahi giant sand dunes on the way — sandboarding down them is a highlight. Bring a body board if you can.

Wellington

Worth a night or two. Te Papa museum is a good starting point, and the Cable Car up to the Botanic Garden gives sweeping harbour views. Pack layers — the weather changes fast.

Napier & Hawke's Bay

Art Deco architecture, compact enough to explore on foot, plus one of NZ's main wine regions. Roughly 2–2.5 hours from Taupō.

BEFORE YOU GO

Booking-Ahead Checklist

A few things on this route sell out or fill up regardless of which itinerary you choose. Book these before you leave home, not once you're on the road.

☐ **Hobbiton tour**
Guided tour only — slots sell out fast in peak season

☐ **Waitomo Glowworm Caves boat tour**
Runs on a schedule — book ahead

☐ **Cathedral Cove parking / shuttle**
Peak season — the main car park fills fast

☐ **Tongariro Alpine Crossing shuttle**
One-way track — book if attempting the crossing

☐ **Bay of Islands accommodation**
One of the busier stops in summer

☐ **Cook Strait ferry (if continuing south)**
Sailings can sell out; weather can affect scheduling

☐ **Rental car**
Check unlimited kilometres — these loops rack up distance

☐ **Local SIM or eSIM**
Sort at Auckland Airport on arrival

☐ **Offline maps downloaded**
Coverage drops out in Coromandel and parts of Taranaki

☐ **Māori cultural evening (Rotorua)**
Set schedules, limited capacity

What to Pack

☐ **Layers & a proper rain jacket**

☐ **Sturdy walking shoes**

☐ **High-SPF sunscreen & a hat**

☐ **Light jacket for the caves**

☐ **Motion sickness remedy**
Acupressure wristbands work well on winding roads

☐ **Reusable water bottle**

☐ **Portable charger**

☐ **Cleared phone storage for photos**

PLANNING AHEAD

Budget & Cost Estimate

These are rough guides, not quotes — prices shift with season, how far ahead you book, and your own style of travel. Figures below are per person, assuming two people travelling together and splitting car and accommodation costs.

Category	Notes	Typical Range
Car rental	Standard sedan; more in peak season (Dec–Feb) or booked late	\$60–\$120 / day
Fuel	These loops cover serious ground	\$15–\$25 / 100km
Accommodation	Mid-range motel, B&B or Airbnb; budget options lower, lodges higher	\$150–\$250 / night
Activities	Hobbiton ~\$115–130pp, Waitomo ~\$65–85pp, geothermal parks ~\$45–65 each	\$300–\$700 / trip
Food	Mixing cafés, the odd nice dinner, and some self-catering	\$60–\$100 / day

Rough Total Per Person

7-day loop	approximately \$1,800 – \$3,000
10-day loop	approximately \$2,600 – \$4,200
14-day loop	approximately \$3,600 – \$5,800

Booking Platforms

Booking.com and Airbnb both cover New Zealand well — Booking.com tends to have better coverage of smaller motels and holiday parks in regional towns, while Airbnb is stronger for whole-house, self-contained stays. Bookabach, a Kiwi holiday-home platform, is worth checking for beach towns — but watch for separate cleaning fees, and check what's supplied, since many baches expect you to bring your own towels and basics.

BOOKING TIMING

- Summer (Dec–Feb) or around a specific event: book at least 2–3 months ahead.
- Shoulder season: a few weeks' notice is usually enough.

Practical Tips for Driving in New Zealand

- **Driving on the left**

Give yourself a day or two to settle in. Expect winding, sometimes narrower roads, especially through Coromandel and around Taranaki.

- **Single-lane bridges**

Common on this route. Signage usually shows right of way — slow down and check as you approach.

- **Speed limits**

Lower than many visitors expect, and enforced. Budget extra time rather than trying to make it up on the road.

- **Toll roads**

Only three in NZ, all on the North Island. \$2.10–\$2.60 per car, no booths — cameras read your plate. Pay within 5 days at tollroad.govt.nz, or ask your rental company.

- **Navigation & connectivity**

Download offline map regions before you set off — coverage drops out in the Coromandel and parts of Taranaki.

- **Sun protection**

NZ sun is harsher than it looks — skin can burn within minutes around midday, even under cloud. Sunscreen and a hat, every day.

- **Motion sickness**

Coastal and mountain roads bring plenty of twists and turns. Pack your usual remedy or acupressure wristbands.

- **Best time to go**

Shoulder season (Oct–Nov or Mar–Apr) offers the best balance — quieter roads, easier bookings, good weather through to April.

A NOTE ON WEATHER

- New Zealand weather changes fast, even within a single day — layers and a proper rain jacket matter more than anything stylish.
- Mt Taranaki is often hidden in cloud — check MetService before committing to viewpoints, and have Napier/Hawke's Bay as a sunnier backup.

MAKE IT YOURS

My Itinerary Planner

Use this grid to lock in your own version of the route — dates, where you're staying, and what's booked.

DAY	DATE	LOCATION	ACCOMMODATION	BOOKED?	NOTES
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					

DAY	DATE	LOCATION	ACCOMMODATION	BOOKED?	NOTES
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					

QUICK REFERENCE WHILE YOU PLAN

- Toll payments: tollroad.govt.nz (within 5 days)
- Weather: metservice.com — check before Taranaki, Tongariro, Cathedral Cove and Hot Water Beach
- Tongariro Crossing conditions: tongarirocrossing.com/weather

*"Build in some slack where you can, check the weather as you go,
and let the road surprise you a little."*

— Anna

Read More on the Blog

- **Bay of Islands Travel Guide** — the full breakdown for the northern leg of the 14-day loop
- **Taranaki Itinerary: A Relaxed Escape Around Mount Taranaki** — a deeper dive into the 10 and 14-day detour
- **Waitomo & West Coast Waikato** — more than just the Glowworm Caves
- **New Zealand Travel Tips for Women Who Travel Their Own Way** — planning around NZ's conditions



SCAN TO REVISIT THE FULL GUIDE ONLINE

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