

New Zealand: Two Islands Where Old Meets New

by Claire Powell

Talking to friends from New Zealand while writing this article confirmed New Zealand's place at the top of my 'Must Visit' list! Tucked away in the Pacific Ocean, here the sun seems to slip more slowly across the sky, perhaps thanks to Maui, a legendary Maori demi-god, whose magic fishing net caught the sun, allowing Maui to ask it to make the days longer.

The first New Zealanders were the Maoris, who travelled there by boat about ten thousand years ago. Maori legend has it that Maui magically fished New Zealand's north island up out of the sea. The south island was his canoe. When you look at a map of the north island, it looks like a fish.

With Maui were his brothers, who promised to stay on the canoe while Maui dived down into the sea to thank the gods for his discovery. While waiting, the brothers got greedy, and started trying to divide up the land by beating the fish. When Maui came up and stopped them, the fish had changed shape – which is how the north island got its valleys and mountains.

'New Zealand' in Maori is 'He Aoteroa' which means 'Land of the Long White Cloud'. When the Maoris travelled by boat to the islands, they crossed what must have seemed like a never-ending ocean. The first thing they saw for a long time was a long white cloud on the horizon, over New Zealand, hence the name.

Centuries later, Europeans arrived. Unfortunately, the relationship between these settlers and the Maoris was difficult. In 1840, the British and the Maoris signed the Treaty of Waitangi, which detailed land and fishing rights. Poorly translated into Maori, the Treaty was misinterpreted, often unfairly for the Maoris.

In 1975, the government established the Waitangi Tribunal, to clarify the Treaty and honour it as a relevant and living document. Now the New Zealand government has a large Maori representation, and Maori rights have been recovered.

A few years ago, in the north island, a road was being built. Maoris objected to the road going through a lake, where there was a 'taniwha' (a legendary water monster). The government bent the road around the lake, preserving not only the 'taniwha' but also a stunning natural area.

Traditionally community-minded, Maoris lived close together, with extended family living nearby. Now, many Maoris are again buying houses together to recreate these communities. The houses may not be old, but they are decorated with traditional paintings and carvings, and in front of the 'marae' (meeting house) is a space where visitors can be welcomed into the house traditionally.

A visitor is 'sung' onto the 'marae', clearing a spiritual pathway for a peaceful meeting between host and guest. The Maori greeting is a 'hongi', where, as well as holding hands, you press noses together – meaning you share breath, and, if your foreheads are also pressed together, you share minds as well.

New Zealand is a very developed, industrialised country, where western and Maori cultures and peoples have integrated so much that Maori traditions were in danger of dying out.

Both Maoris and non-Maoris realised the importance of preserving Maori culture. Maoris began re-teaching their children traditional Maori crafts. Recently, Maori language became a core school subject. Many New Zealanders encourage this development, recognising that Maori language is an integral part of New Zealand's culture.

The Maoris probably originated from around Japan, as the pronunciation of the Maori language is very similar to Japanese, and the Japanese can often say Maori words more convincingly than the average non-Maori New Zealander.

Interestingly, New Zealand English also has its own vibrant language! New Zealand slang is different to British and American slang, and even different to Australian. My favourites are 'chilli bin'; nothing to do with spicy food, but New Zealand slang for a cool box, and 'give it some jandal', meaning 'put your foot down on the accelerator and speed up' ('jandals' are plastic shoes - 'flip flops' in the UK and 'thongs' in Australia!). Now I must rattle my dags (hurry up) because today I'm off tramping (walking) in the bush (countryside). See you later! And in Maori – Aroha nui!