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When last I wrote, we had just started on our journey around the "middle third" of the North Island. Just as we had hoped, it was a journey full of adventure, interesting people, and wonderful places. Somehow, we arrived home with books unread, sketch-books empty, and bones uncarved. Isn't it funny how a holiday stretches out in front of you as endless time to be filled, and then fills itself regardless of your plans!

First, the people.

We paused briefly at Rudi Milesi's amazing "Chriesiwald" garden in Patea on the way to New Plymouth. It was raining too much for garden-viewing, but the wonder of how much he has crammed into an ordinary sized section was plain to see. Rudi told us that the Taranaki Swiss Club had the same energising influx of younger generations at their January picnic as we're seeing at events in Wellington. That is so great to see, and a credit to our committees who organise things that appeal to everyone.

In Hamilton, we spent a delightful time with Wally and Vicky Unternährer. The conversation was woven through with "do you remember so and so", and "what's happened to...", and the years were stitched together with all of those connections between people. We left rattling with stones from Wally's extraordinary collection of things gathered and polished, and inspired to comb the many beaches along the way.

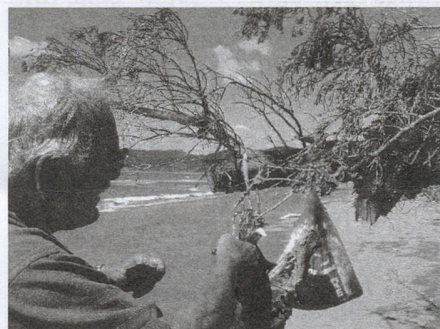
Of course, going from campsite to campsite you meet all sorts. There is the common interest in the mobile life, but after that there is such a rich variety of life stories and interests to follow. There was the American chap with his full camping gear strapped to his bike, and pukeko-thin legs that hardly seemed adequate for hills in front of him. There was the young woman and child in two tiny tents in a rain storm. We gave her a plate of bacon and eggs as she tried to dry

things the next morning. The tents were home while she tried to find an affordable house to rent. And then of course there were many more people like us -- comfortable and well-equipped, travelling for pleasure.

The places.

We discovered some new favourites and rediscovered old. New Plymouth was a surprise. I had worked there in the early 70s, and Mani had been in Hawera in the 60s, and we found the place almost unrecognisable. The seven kilometre long walkway around the city's sea-edge is stunning. We biked it, relishing both the concept and its construction.

Another favourite (new to me -- old to Mani) is the Awakeri Hot Springs a little inland from Whakatane. The hot pools are well-designed -- even to the under-floor heating in the changing rooms! -- and the camp has not just lots of mature trees, but plenty of new plantings coming through. You can form a lot of judgements about the owners and managers of camping grounds when you see where they put their energies.



Mani harvesting wild boar tusks for carving

Then the East Cape -- I had forgotten how exceptionally beautiful the stretch from Opotiki to Hick's Bay is. Endless deep sea rolling in to small bays embraced in rocky cliffs with huge pohutukawas -- and so very green. Then when you go "round the corner" onto the East Coast side, there's that shift to long sandy beaches, and dry rolling country. The towns are a bit sad though. When I lived in Gisborne

in the 70s the little towns "up the coast" seemed to tick over serving their local communities. Now, there are many empty and abandoned places -- the old stock and station agents stores are remnants of the way things used to be.

The adventures.

Neither Mani nor I had ever been to the Waitomo Caves -- and that needed to be put right! My brother said "don't go through the tourist trap way -- do the black water rafting excursion". We did. It was amazing -- and right at the outer limit of our physical ability. First there's pulling on a wet wet-suit. Clammy, clingy, and not my shape at all! Then there's the "test-jump". When you're actually in the caves, you get down the water-falls by throwing yourself backwards off the edge, your tractor inner tube firmly clutched to your bottom, and hoping you'll land neatly with your bottom inside the tube in the black water below. The test jump is done outside in the light -- it's too late once the party is inside the cave to discover that someone can't bring themselves to make the leap! Then you clamber down into the cave and stumble along the creek-bed, lit by the miner's lamp on your helmet. When the water's deep enough, you scull along on your tube, looking up and seeing the magic you're there for -- the cave roof like a milky way of glow-worms. Truly awe-inspiring. And then an hour later, there's the climb up out of the cave, over huge boulders, with wet-suit-clad knees that no longer want to bend. Am I glad we did it? Absolutely! Would I do it again? No way!

Ah, but a much less physically challenging adventure awaited. We went out to the Mahia peninsula (another old/new favourite), and yes -- Moko the resident dolphin turned up and had a great time entertaining herself with us all in the thigh-deep water. Aren't we lucky to live in such a country!